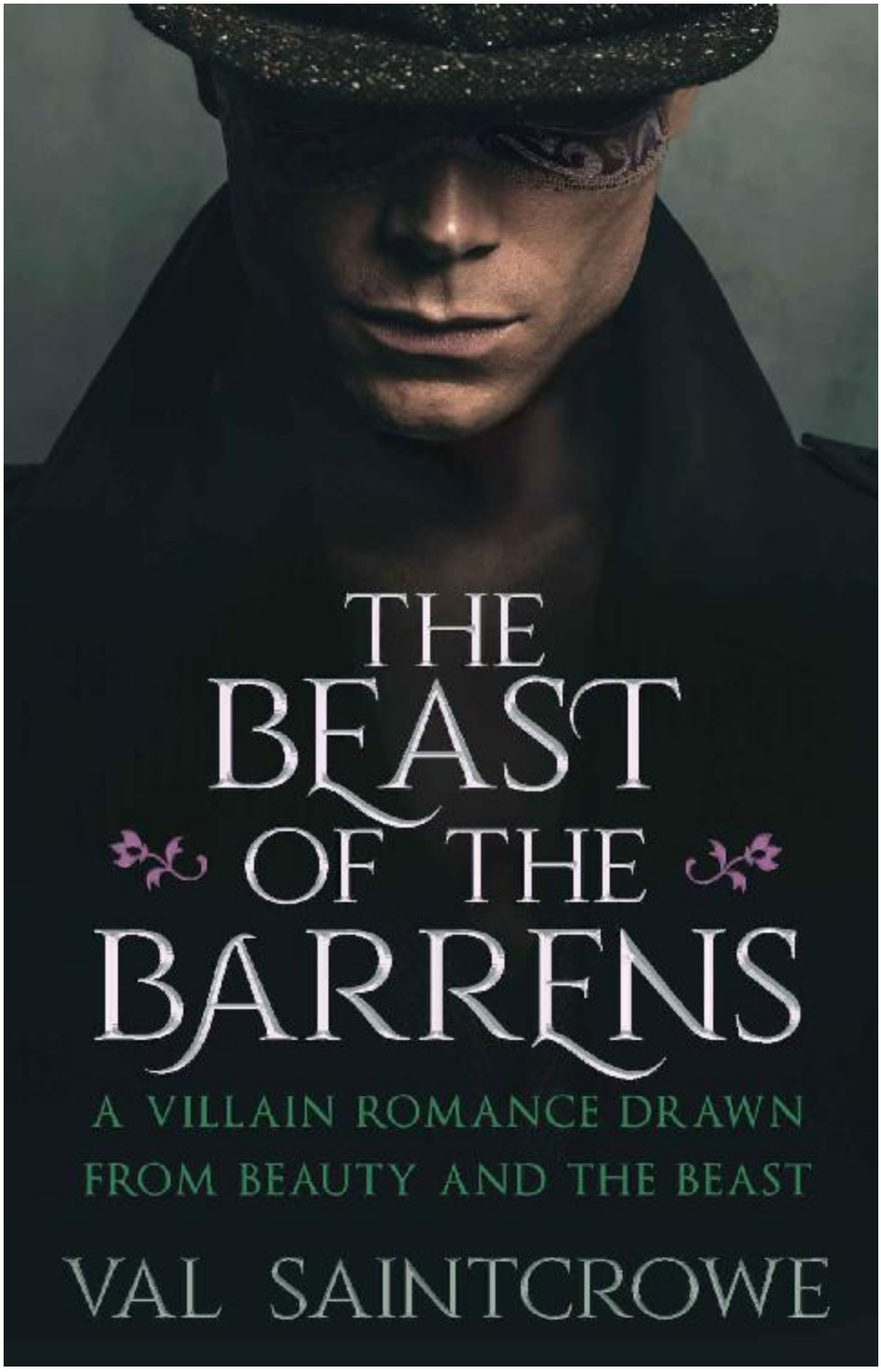

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The Beast of the Barrens

a villain romance drawn from Beauty and the Beast

Val Saintcrowe

THE BEAST OF THE BARRENS

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CHAPTER ONE

The sky had taken on the gray color that signaled the coming of dawn, and still, the card game

continued.

The Popina Tavern had been closed for hours now, and the staff had all been sent home. The

players were serving themselves drinks now, though everyone had long since dropped out of the game

besides the final two players.

Anyone watching would speak of the game for years to come, the way that Chevolere Vox, the

Beast of the Barrens as they called him, seemed too eager for Federo Abrusse to stay in the game.

When the elder man, street lord of the infamous Abrusse family, tried to gather his winnings and go, Chevolere leaned forward, his eyes glittering behind the black leather mask he always wore, and

said, “What will it take to keep you in the game? What do I need to put into the pot to entice you?”

Abrusse laughed, getting up from the table. “I am an old man, Vox. My bed is calling.”

The mask was similar to a typical mask worn by revelers at a masquerade party, mostly covering

the top part of Chevolere’s face, from his forehead to the bridge of his nose. But on the left side, it went lower, down over his cheek, all the way down to nearly cover his jaw. Speculation was that this was to cover whatever horror was beneath. No one had seen the scars beneath Chevolere’s mask, but

the rumors ran wild. Some said he had been burned in an awful fire and that his face was pink and

horrid beneath, a mass of twisted flesh. Others insisted it was acid that had scalded him instead, that his skin had been eaten away and now there was nothing beneath but the thinnest stretch of muscle and scar tissue. Still others said that he had been mauled by a wild animal. Reports ranged from wolves to bears to large predatory cats like some sailors told stories of in the rugged lands across the seas.

Chevolere began taking off his rings, tossing them in with the chips that they had been using to play the game. He took off jewel after jewel, and Abrusse laughed and laughed, saying he was flattered,

but he was also exhausted.

“Some other time,” said Abrusse to Chevolere. “We will play again, I promise it. I have enjoyed

my time with you.”

“Nothing would entice you?” said Chevolere. “Nothing at all?’

Abrusse considered this. Finally, he raised one shoulder. “Perhaps if you put up this tavern, your

place of business, your livelihood. And we both know you would not risk such a thing.”

Chevolere smiled, his mouth curving below his mask. “This could be possible, but if I do such a

thing, you must put up something equally as precious to you.”

“What? One of my businesses?”

“No, no,” said Chevolere, putting his jeweled rings back on his fingers. “No, you have many

businesses, and this—as you say—is my livelihood. Something irreplaceable, instead."

"I have no notion what that might be." Abrusse sat back down at the table. He had not agreed, but

he might as well have.

"Your daughter," said Chevolere. "The youngest girl, the one who is still living at home with you.

If I win, you will give her to me to do with as I wish."

A collective gasp went through the other players, all shocked that Chevolere would suggest such a

thing.

Abrusse did not get up from the table. "Ziafiata is the light of my life. Are you suggesting I let the likes of you marry her?"

"Did I say anything about marriage?" said Chevolere.

There were more murmurs from those assembled.

"Your daughter ran off with the son of your enemy a year ago, did she not?" said Chevolere. "It is

not as if she is pure and untouched. There is no marrying her off, regardless. She is tainted."

"That is not true," Abrusse growled, slamming a palm down on the table. "I promise you that that

blackguard never touched her."

Chevolere shrugged.

"I would certainly never let a brute like you anywhere near her."

The Beast of the Barrens was rumored to have beastlike appetites when it came to women. So

much so that the madame of Sereine House had forbidden him from visiting the beds of any of her

girls. She was the only one who was brave enough and strong enough to take the man into her bed, and he visited her exclusively. What he did there no one knew, but it was said to be horrifying.

“Make another suggestion,” said Abrusse.

“I have no other suggestion to make,” said Chevolere. “Are you frightened that you will not be able to beat me at cards, is that it?”

“I am frightened of nothing,” scoffed Abrusse, “least of all a game of cards.”

“Then let us play,” said Chevolere. “We both have something precious to lose. It will be quite the

game. Doesn’t your heart beat faster at the thought of it?”

Abrusse sighed, but he was still seated at the table. No one was truly surprised when he

acquiesced, putting his own daughter up as collateral in a card game.

The game that followed was tense and prolonged. Each man took as much time as he possibly

could to make each move. Each time he decided to exchange a card or stay with his current hand, each man could be seen to weigh the decision long and hard.

At first, Abrusse had the king of stones face out on the table and Chevolere had the three of roses.

But then Chevolere's face cards included the five of roses and the two of roses and Abrusse had

only the three of rods and the two of daggers.

It would all rely on what cards the men had in their hands.

When they lay their cards down in the final round, Chevolere had a full suit of roses, including the una. Abrusse had a pair of kings. He had lost. He was angry, demanding to examine the deck, which

Chevolere handed over easily enough.

Abrusse went through the cards twice, raging the entire time that Chevolere must have cheated, that there was no other way to assemble such a hand. But he could find nothing wrong with the deck, and

eventually he quieted, his face drawn and haggard.

The sun was struggling into the sky now, and the golden rays fell on Abrusse's wrinkled face. He

was solemn and silent for some time, turning the cards over in his hands. Finally, he stopped and set them down, face up.

"There must be something else you would wish from me," said Abrusse. "You cannot be serious as

to actually follow through on this intention. My daughter is not…"

"Not the sort of the thing a man offers up as collateral in a card game?" Chevolere's smile was not kind. He snatched the cards away from Abrusse and set them inside a case. He began to gather up

chips from the middle of the table and stack them in rows. The chips were made from wood, and they

were scratched and grooved from use. "Well, that was your choice, wasn't it, Federo?"

“Take one of my inns,” said Abrusse. “The Cliff Tavern is right across the street. Think how you

could expand if you had control of it.”

“I will come to collect her in two hours’ time,” said Chevolere.

“Two hours?” Abrusse was on his feet. “She will hardly have had time to wake up and get dressed

for the day!”

“I don’t trust you not to spirit her off somewhere,” said Chevolere, calmly stacking wooden chips.

“Play me another game then,” said Abrusse. “When people hear of this, they will think…”

“That you have no concern for your daughter?” said Chevolere, his voice taking on a hard edge.

“That you are, perhaps, uncaring and irresponsible?”

Abrusse’s nostrils flared. “Do you have some quarrel with me, Vox? If so, you might have come

out with it like a gentlemen instead of using underhanded trickery and—”

“It was a game of cards, sir,” said Chevolere, tilting back his masked face. “You could have won

as easily as I.”

Abrusse shook his head slowly. “You must have cheated. You—”

“Two hours,” said Chevolere. “See that she’s ready for me.” He got up from the table. Concealed

in his sleeves were more than one card that he'd palmed and hidden during the game. He didn't like to think of it as cheating, however. He thought of it as ensuring the proper result.

CHAPTER TWO

Ziafiata Abrusse woke after a fitful sleep and thrust aside the bed covers to get out of bed. She

went to the window and looked out to see that the dawn was stealing its way into the sky.

Immediately, she rang for a servant to come.

Not her maid, though.

Her father had dismissed her maid a month ago, a punishment for some sin of hers, and she

couldn't remember what it had been now. Possibly that she had smiled at the wrong time. Possibly

that she had not smiled when she was meant to.

The servant burst through the door, shaking her head.

"He never came home?" said Ziafiata.

"No, mistress," said the servant, who currently balanced duties in the kitchen with helping Ziafiata to fasten the buttons she couldn't reach and to plait her hair. Ziafiata did what she could herself, of course. It would be too much for one servant to take on all the duties of a maid in addition to

everything else.

"Blazes," whispered Ziafiata. This couldn't be good. "He'll be drunk when he gets back, then.

Have you thought of what to serve for breakfast?"

“Oh, already started on it. We will be serving as much of the sausages and sweetbreads as we can

manage. And, of course, coffee. We will sober him up as best we can.”

“Good,” said Ziafiata, taking a deep breath. That was the best they could do, then. Her father was

not an easy man under the best of circumstances, but after a night of drinking, he was unbearable.

Her father had exacting standards, and Ziafiata did her best to meet them. She only failed when her father changed the rules on her, which he did often enough.

She had long ago learned that the punishments she received weren’t about her failures but about

her father’s enjoyment of meting them out.

He was a hard man to live with.

He never put his hands on her, of course. He was not physical in that way. His punishments were

more intricate and devious. He liked to cause her discomfort. He liked to remove her joys and

pleasures.

Perhaps Federo Abrusse’s deviousness was an asset as a street lord. It allowed him to keep

control of the underbelly of the city of Rzymn. But in his household, it did nothing but cause misery.

It was after one of her father’s punishments of Ziafiata’s mother that the woman succumbed to

sickness, after having been forced to spend a night out on the roof in freezing weather. She had also lost a finger to the frost rot, but that had hardly mattered when she hadn't lived but a week beyond the incident.

Her father repented of this. He went to the brothers and confessed and did penance for weeks. He

promised Ziafiata and her two older sisters that he would change, and for a time, things did get better.

But slowly, her father's punishments returned.

It was no wonder that both of Ziafiata's elder sisters had married young, to whatever men who

would take them. Ziafiata herself had attempted an elopement, but it had failed. She should have

known better than to fall for the son of her father's rival, the heir to the Caputio family.

The servant gestured to Ziafiata's wardrobe. "Shall I help you to dress?"

Ziafiata shook her head. "No, best if you are in the kitchen. Everyone should be in the kitchen now.

We must have the smell of food wafting out when he walks through the door, so that he goes straight there and does not seek anyone out to find fault with."

"As you say," said the servant, giving a quick curtsy before she left the room.

Ziafiata dressed herself, selecting a gown that was easy enough for her to get into herself, one that laced up the front. She braided her hair herself, something that she could do fairly well, except for the fact that the resulting braid always wanted to lie over one shoulder and not down the middle of her back.

When she heard her father come in, he called for her the minute he came in the door.

Her heart sank, but she knew better than to delay or pretend as though she hadn't heard him. This

would displease him, and she couldn't be sure what he might do in response.

She hurried down the steps and met him at the entryway to their house. The house was on the

outskirts of the Trisaccio part of town, right on the water, accessible only by boat. The city of Rzymn was an island that had outgrown its borders and expanded onto the water. This house's foundations

were far under the water, anchored to the land below. The house was up on stilts because high tide

brought the waters nearly to the front door. But it was low tide now, and her father had to ascend

steps from the dock below.

"Father," said Ziafiata, taking him in. He did not look as though he had brawled or fought with

weapons. That was something, at least. "Would you not care for some breakfast?"

He looked her over from head to toe. "I have news for you, Ziafiata."

She licked her lips. News? What a strange thing to say to her. "There are sausages and

sweetbreads, I think. Are you not hungry? You must be both hungry and tired to have been gone all

night."

“I have lost you in a card game,” said her father.

Ziafiata raised her eyebrows. “You have… you have what?”

“I was maneuvered into a position by that dreadful Chevolere Vox. He did it to humiliate me, and I

am sure he cheated. That man has no honor. What is he? An upstart tavern owner who sells cainlach?

How dare he think to trifle with me, with a street lord? He will pay for this, make no mistake. But there were witnesses, girl, and I cannot back down. You’ll have to go to him.”

Chevolere Vox?

The man who was banned even from visiting prostitutes because his appetites were so unbearably

savage?

Her father had lost her in a card game to the Beast of the Barrens?

Ziafiata uttered a tiny noise, in the back of her throat. It might have been a sob.

“Oh, don’t,” snapped her father.

“But what have I done, Father?” said Ziafiata. “Why do I deserve such a thing?”

“It’s not about you,” said her father. “It’s about something between Vox and myself, some personal

grudge he bears me. He hides it well, but he let his feelings come through a bit there at the end. He means to hurt me, to embarrass me, and he has done so. I…” Her father clenched both hands into fists.

“If it will embarrass you, say no.” Ziafiata tried to stop the words from coming out of her mouth.

Telling her father what to do was a recipe for pain. He would not take well to it. She cringed, as he lifted his gaze to hers.

“I would if I could, believe me,” was all he said. His shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, Zia.”

Her father was *apologizing* to her?

“I am skilled with cards. You know this. I would not have undertaken the risk if I did not believe

that I could prevail against him. He must have cheated. There is no other explanation. And when I

discover that, I will ruin him. Unfortunately, I don’t know what will become of you, because once he has his way with you, you be thoroughly destroyed. Between that and your little dalliance with Diago, there will be no shred of reputation left for you. But some of that is your own fault, I must say.”

Ziafiata pressed her fingers to her mouth. Inside, she was coming apart, but outwardly, she refused to react. She still feared her father, and she was already heading for the worst punishment she could possibly imagine. She could not bear for him to add to the punishment. That would be more than she

could bear.

“Well,” said her father. “You might as well tell your maid to pack your things. He’ll be here in an hour and a half.”

“I have no maid.” Her voice was strangled. “You dismissed my maid.”

“Oh, I did, didn’t I?” Her father sighed.

“I’ll pack myself,” said Ziafiata, and she turned and ran up the stairs as quickly as she could.

She shut herself in her room and stared at her bed. She had the urge to fling herself down on it and bury her face in the pillow. She wanted to sob and sob until there were no tears left.

But she had cried before, many times, and she had learned something about crying.

Tears were useless. They changed nothing.

She didn’t cry. Instead, she took several deep breaths and went to her wardrobe. She busied

herself with folding her dresses and putting them in her trunk.

When she went down again, sometime later, she was in full control of herself. She asked one of the

servants to bring her trunk down.

The food in the dining room had been eaten, but her father was nowhere to be seen.

Ziafiata wasn’t hungry, but she forced herself to choke down something, because she did not wish

to go into her ordeal with no food in her stomach.

Then she went back to the entryway, where her trunk had been deposited on the floor. She sat down

on it and waited. She had only ever seen the Beast of the Barrens from afar. He was a tavern owner

and a terrifying man. Though she was the daughter of an infamous criminal, she was kept away from

such men as he. She was raised with a modicum of respectability.

What would he be like? What would he say to her? What would his mask look like?

Despite everything, she was curious about the man.

But he didn’t come to collect her himself. Instead, he sent four musqueteers, to whom he must have

been paying bribes, because the musqueteers were the holy army of the Order of the Flamme, and they served at the will of the patriarch himself.

The musqueteers took her trunk and loaded it on the back of a boat. They put their hands on their

pistols, as if they expected her to resist, but she did not. What would be the point of fighting? It would only be undignified.

She went with them with her chin held high, as regal as a queen.

The boat wound through the canals that cut through the city and stopped behind the tavern that the

Beast of the Barrens owned. It was located in the Barrens, of course, a part of the city that was

frequented only by those who were poor or criminals or both.

She entered the tavern’s kitchen, which was bustling full of workers there making food and drink

for the day. The tavern did not open for business until near lunch, as was customary, but the workers were there to prepare. They looked up when she arrived, and she felt their eyes on her, and she heard the whispers as she passed.

Apparently, news of her arrival had preceded her. She supposed it wasn’t every day that a street

lord lost his daughter in a card game.

When they left the kitchen, they came into the tavern proper, a large room full of wooden tables of various shapes and sizes, all surrounded with mismatched chairs. The far wall had a stage running

across it, a threadbare velvet curtain pulled aside to reveal several folding screens with various

scenery painted on them, a collection of stools, and a harpsichord.

A woman with a kerchief around her head was running a wet rag over the tables. She looked up at

the sound of the kitchen door closing. “Oh,” she said. “You’re here.” She dropped the rag on one of the tables with a plop and scurried over. “Follow me, if you please. I’ll show you where to leave the mistress’s trunk.”

Mistress? Was she to be the Beast’s wife, then? If that were the case, her father wouldn’t have said the bit about her reputation being ruined.

The woman curtsied to Ziafiata. “My name is Marta Russi. I’ll be seeing to you as best I can. If

you have a maid, the master says—”

“I don’t,” said Ziafiata. Perhaps her voice was too curt. Perhaps she should have been warmer to

this woman, who obviously had no fault in this, but Ziafiata had been through quite a lot that morning, and she was nearing her breaking point.

“Well, I’ll be helping you a bit, then,” said Marta. “But I’m not your maid either. I haven’t got time to be a lady’s maid in addition to everything else I’m doing around here. I’m sorry about that.”

Ziafiata only nodded.

“Let’s get you settled,” said Marta. She turned and walked towards the stage.

After a moment, the musqueteers realized they were meant to follow and they took off after her,

dragging Ziafiata along when she didn’t immediately hop to and move.

Marta led them up a narrow and rickety set of stairs to a small room above the stage. There was a

bed in one corner and a mirror attached to one wall. There was a wardrobe, but it was missing both

its doors. The floor had cracks in it so wide that Ziafiata could see straight through down to the stage.

She made no reaction to the room. Neither did she thank the musqueteers for bringing their trunk or speak when Marta asked if there was anything she needed.

Instead, she was silent and serene.

Marta said that the master was catching a few hours of sleep, but that he would be with her before

noon. She said that she would be back to check on Ziafiata at some point later.

When they all left, Ziafiata tried the door, and it wasn’t locked, but she did not think to try to

escape. It would be pointless, anyway, with so many workers below. She did not wish to call

attention to the fact that she had not been locked in either.

Ziafiata did not know where she would go if she did escape. Returning to her father would likely

only anger him, and it would also probably mean that he simply returned her to Chevolere. Perhaps,

however, if she could make her way to Diago, perhaps he would shelter her.

Soon enough, it was too loud to think, because entertainers had taken to the stage below, and

Ziafiata was treated to the sound of singing and of boisterous music that women danced to, kicking

bare legs out of their skirts in tantalizing ways.

Customers began to fill the tables in the tavern. Ziafiata could see them through the cracks in the floor of her room. She was so busy watching them that she wasn't watching the door when it opened.

Instead, she heard it, and she looked up quickly, and by then, he was already filling the doorway.

Chevolere Vox, the Beast of the Barrens, stood there in a black cape and a black mask. He strode

through the doorway, shutting the door behind him firmly, and he advanced on her.

Ziafiata had been sitting on the floor—the better to look through the cracks—and she scrambled to

her feet, her heart soaring into her throat.

Chevolere stopped, two feet away. He dragged his gaze over her, and she could feel it, like a cold

breeze, fluttering over her, exploring every dip and curve of her body.

She clenched her teeth, willing her heart to beat more slowly. She did not wish this man to

understand how much he unnerved her. This close to him, however, she could not help but look at him as well. That curiosity within her wished to be sated.

His mask covered almost all of his face, but she noted that his eyes were blue. No, they weren't,

they were gray, a very light gray that could almost pass for blue, but was ultimately colorless. His chin was clean shaven, but she could see that his hair, if he let it grow, would be dark. He was

expressionless as he took her in. There was no way to know whether he approved or disapproved of

her, not that she wished to please him, and not that there must be any doubt if he had manipulated her father into gambling her away.

The Beast of the Barrens wanted her.

The thought made her want to convulse in horror. She bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep

from doing so.

But no, perhaps it wasn't that way at all. Her father had indicated that there was some sort of

personal indemnity between Vox and her father, and if that was the case, she might be incidental in the entire situation.

Chevolere's gaze found her own, and she met it, staring defiantly into his gray eyes.

Moments passed.

Chevolere took another step closer to her.

Her breath caught in her throat.

He was inches away from her now. She could feel his breath on her cheeks. He was taller than she

was and he seemed far too large and far too close.

Ziafiata stepped backwards, and she was horrified to stumble a bit when she did so.

Chevolere's arm shot out and caught her shoulder. Roughly, he tugged her forward again.

She collided with his chest, letting out a noise of protest.

"Ah, there it is." Chevolere's voice was deep. "You are frightened of me, though you try to hide

it."

"I am *not*." She spat the words in his face.

"Then you are a fool."

She shrugged his hand off her shoulder.

He put it back, and his other hand on her other shoulder besides. He dug his fingers into her flesh.

"Stay still."

"And if I don't?" She sneered at him. "You plan to use me ill no matter what I do, is that not so?

Why should I make it any easier for you?"

"I am prepared not to touch a hair on your head."

"Too late." She nodded at his grasp on her shoulders.

He let go of her immediately, taking a step backward. “My quarrel is with your father. My intent is to make him suffer. To that end, it is only important that you should *appear* to have been ill used.”

She licked her lips. So. He didn’t want her after all.

“However,” said Chevolere, “I do need something from you. If you see fit to give it to me, I shall

not need to extract it from you.”

She furrowed her brow. “I have nothing. I have come only with a trunk full of clothes, and you are

keeping me in this horrible room—”

“The thing I need from you is in here.” He closed the distance between them again and tapped her

temple with one finger. Oh, his hands were rather large, weren’t they? And the hair that grew on the backs of his hands was dark, just as she’d thought. “When you were married to Diago Caputio, he

took you to the family fortress on Sierboli for your wedding night.” Sierboli was an island, rather larger than Rzymn, an hour’s trip away by boat.

“There was no wedding night,” she lied through clenched teeth, because that was what she had

been taught to say.

“I couldn’t care less about your maidenhead,” said Chevolere. “Whether it is intact or not is

nothing to me. You were there. At the Caputio family fortress. You saw where the key is kept.”

Her lips parted. The Caputio family fortress had a door that was latched with the most complicated

of locks ever created, as far as anyone knew. The locksmith who had crafted it was named Vilirus

Biancce, and he had been forced to make it out for fear for the life of his wife and children, who

Abramo Caputio had captured and refused to release until the lock was created. The lock required a

special key—a large key—one too big to carry around on one's keyring. It was instead ensconced in a secret location that only certain members of the Caputio family knew about.

Ziafiata had indeed watched as Diago had taken the key from its hiding place to unlock the door.

She knew where it was.

"Where is the key?" said Chevolere.

"Why do you want to enter the Caputio fortress?"

"It's part of my plan for your father," said Chevolere. "I won't tell you more than that. It's unlikely to motivate you to wish to help me. I rather imagine you have some twisted admiration and loyalty to the man, no matter what he has done to you."

Her nostrils flared. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I know what sort of man Federo Abrusse is," said Chevolere. "He deserves what I will do to

him. And you might find you are happy to be free of him."

"Are you going to kill my father?"

Chevolere didn’t answer, and his expression was stone. “The key.”

“No,” she said. “I won’t tell you.”

“He has no loyalty to you,” said Chevolere. “If he did, he would never have given you to *me*.”

Against her will, her lower lip began to tremble.

Chevolere put his knuckles under her chin, lifting her face so that she was looking into his

colorless eyes again. “With him gone, you will never have to endure him again.”

“I will hardly be free, however,” she said, her voice trembling. It was trembling in anger, but it

sounded like weakness. “What future would I have as a woman with a ruined reputation, the

discarded plaything of the Beast of the Barrens?”

Chevolere dropped his hand. He took a step back and regarded her. “I will see to it that you are

provided for. A woman with finances always has a future.”

She didn’t respond.

“Help me, and I will make this as painless as possible for you.”

She let out a harsh laugh. “And if I don’t help you?”

“Pain will only be the beginning,” said Chevolere. His voice was still expressionless, but some

horrible light had gone on behind his eyes, some burning desire that shook her.

“Never,” she whispered.

“Your loyalty to that man is misplaced,” said Chevolere.

“Not because of Father,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “Because of Diago. I would never

betray him.”

This surprised Chevolere. She could see it in his posture. He was silent for several moments. Then

he stroked his chin. “The man with whom you had no wedding night? That is where your loyalties

lie?”

She didn’t respond to that. She wished that Diago would have defied his father as she had defied

hers, but in the end, he had not fought for her. She understood, however. Abramo Caputio was as hard a father as her own. Diago hadn’t had a choice.

Chevolere’s mouth curved into a smile. “Well, I am sorry for you, dear Ziafiata, but I can’t say I

am entirely displeased with this turn of events. I shall take pleasure in extracting the location of the key from you.”

She shivered in spite of herself.

Chevolere closed the distance between them once again. He caressed her cheek. “You are a very

pretty girl, after all.”

She yanked her face back from his grasp. “Do your worst. I will never betray Diago.”

“We’ll see,” said Chevolere, and that fire in his eyes, it was there again, burning brighter than it had before. “We’ll see.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ziafiata was left alone with thoughts of Diago, and she tried never to think of him.

But with nothing else to entertain herself and no way to escape, she found herself at a loss to

distract herself, and she lay down on the narrow bed as the music below filtered up through the cracks and thought of him.

Diago had been forbidden to her, of course. It was unlikely that they should have ever met at all,

but he had somehow found his way into the reception of Ziafiata’s elder sister’s wedding, he and

several of his friends, all of whom worked for the Caputio family.

She had seen him across the courtyard. It had been high summer. The air had been warm. He had

golden curly hair, and he had looked angelic, the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She had seen him before, of course, in the streets of Rzymn or inside his family’s boats on the canals. But it had been years since she had, and he had grown up. She had grown up, too.

What perversity within her drove her to go to him, she could not be sure of.

It was in that time when things were relatively better, the time when her father still repented for his part in her mother’s death, but just at the tail end of it all. Perhaps her father’s permissiveness, his preoccupation with his own grief, had made her brave.

Or perhaps it was only that when one is imprisoned one's entire life, kept from doing even the

most banal of things by some oppressive force, one becomes rather like the living flame that resides within the musquets of the musqueteers—ready to explode.

This was perhaps her explosion.

At any rate, she had gone to him, winding through the courtyard as if on a meandering path, but sure in her intent. She found herself at Diago's side, and she spoke to him. Her father would not approve of such things. Indeed, no one would.

The Caputio family and the Abrusse family were rivals on the streets of Rzymn, both vying with

the other to be the most powerful street family and rule the city's underbelly. There was no love

between the two families. One might even say there was hate.

Consorting with any Caputio was strictly forbidden, but Diago, the heir apparent, it was

unthinkable.

What could have driven her to do it?

What could she have been thinking?

The truth was she had hardly been thinking at all. It had called to her, a sweet song of excitement.

Perhaps the certain destruction to which she confined herself if she was caught was appealing in some awful way. Perhaps she *wanted* to explode.

She hadn't done it because she expected to fall in love with Diago or he with her. She hadn't

expected him to wish to marry her. She had only wanted… she didn't know… a moment to blaze

brightly in the summer night.

But Diago, he was…

She had never met anyone like him. She was dazzled by his good looks. When she was near him,

she often felt tongue-tied and shy, and she didn't think that he could possibly be drawn to her as well, but he was.

They sneaked around for months, and it was the most frightfully exciting and romantic thing she

could have dreamed of.

She told lies—saying to her father that she was staying with one of her married sisters and instead going to meet Diago. They sailed through the canals under the glittering stars and climbed the

cathedrals in the heart of the city. They kissed in the balconies overlooking the main square of Rzymn.

When he asked her to marry him, he wanted to do it then, that very night, and she was so caught up

in the idea of it that she couldn't have refused, not even if she'd been shown how it would all turn out.

Maybe she had known, even then, that it couldn't work between them.

She had come to him for an explosion, after all.

She must have been steeling herself for it to happen.

Diago bribed a carale to marry them in the back room of some cathedral, and then they fled to the

island of Sierboli, where the marriage was very thoroughly consummated. Twice.

But by then, her father had wind of it for she hadn’t come home when she had promised she would,

and her sister had told her father that she hadn’t come to stay at all, and the entire Abrusse family was combing the city, looking for her.

It didn’t take them long to uncover the carale bribed to perform the ceremony, and then Abramo

Caputio himself came and separated them.

She cowered on the bed that she’d shared with her new husband, clutching the sheets to her chest

so tightly that her fingers ached, while Diago listened to his father rage with a bowed head, while he bore his father’s slaps and blows to the head without making a noise.

Then she was sent back to her father and given a frightfully awful-tasting tea to drink, which

brought on her bleeding and ensured that no Caputio seed would quicken in her womb.

And everyone pretended it had never happened.

Except Chevolere Vox, apparently, who had purchased her from her father precisely because it had

occurred.

It was the worst of her sins, the excuse her father used for every punishment he visited upon her

since. She was not worthy of the Abrusse name. She was a common tramp, a hussy who spread her

legs for Caputio trash. She was a disappointment. She was a failure.

Outwardly, she was her father's favorite, his youngest, most beautiful daughter, upon which he

doted.

Inwardly, she was despised.

She had never seen Diago after that. She never went anywhere without the watchful eye of her

father, so it was hardly surprising.

But she still loved Diago.

She thought she would always love him, that she would go to her grave with her love for Diago

etched deeply into her soul. He might have been her enemy, but he was also her soul mate.

* * *

Marta Russi claimed she would come back to see to Ziafiata, but midday came and went and there

was no sign of the tavern wench. It was not until far later in the evening, when Ziafiata's stomach was growling, that Marta returned.

"You're to dine with the master in his private rooms tonight," said Marta, as if Ziafiata would be

impressed by such a thing.

Ziafiata was not impressed, and she did not wish to dine with Chevolere. If she had been given

something to eat a few hours before, she might have put up some kind of fight, but she was very

hungry, and she decided that she would endure the meal if it meant she could get something into her stomach.

She would need her strength, after all, if she planned to escape that night after the tavern closed.

So, she allowed Marta to help her dress in one of her best frocks, a red dress that dipped low in

the front and had wide, flowing sleeves with lace ruffles. Then she allowed Marta to bind her hair in a knot on her head, and she followed Marta to the master's rooms.

There, a table had been set out, two plates already laden with meat and potatoes and greens.

Chevolere was on the other side of the room at a sideboard, pouring wine. He turned when she

entered, and he looked her over with his pale gray eyes. He did not smile or frown.

She pushed past Marta and went to sit down at one of the plates. Without waiting for anything, she

picked up a fork and speared a small potato. She shoved it into her mouth and chewed.

"Hungry?" said Chevolere, setting a goblet of wine in front of her. He turned to Marta. "That'll be all."

"Sir," said Marta, who curtsied, her expression wide with horror, probably because Ziafiata had

been so rude as to begin eating before the master. She backed out of the room, shutting the door

behind her.

Ziafiata was thirsty, but she didn’t dare drink the wine. She must have her wits about her, and it

looked strong.

Chevolere sat down at the other end of the table, placing his wine glass deliberately next to his

plate. He sat down.

She began attacking her meat with the knife she’d been given, which was truly rather dull for the

task, but the meat was not an expensive cut, and had been slowly cooked for so long that it was

practically falling apart. It was good, she supposed, mostly because of the rich sauce it had been

cooked in. She resolved to eat it too quickly to taste it. She would take pleasure in nothing in this place, and she would only eat for her own survival.

Chevolere watched her, expressionless. He did not eat anything himself.

She swallowed the bite she had been chewing. “If you had fed me a midday meal, as any civilized

man would have done, perhaps I would not be so famished.” She didn’t know why she was explaining

herself. She did not owe this man any explanation at all.

“My apologies,” said Chevolere. “I was not aware that you were not fed today.”

“You didn’t do it on purpose?” She cut a potato with her fork. “It’s not the beginning of your intent to make me change my mind about betraying Diago?”

“Have you changed your mind?”

“No.”

“I did not plan to starve the information out of you, no.”

She took another bite of food and chewed furiously.

He picked up his glass of wine and took a thoughtful drink. “Starvation takes a rather long time.

I’m impatient. Besides, starvation provides very little gratification to me.”

Her stomach lurched. She swallowed her food and set down her utensils. Suddenly, she wasn’t

feeling very hungry. He was impatient?

“I suppose we’ll start tonight, then,” said Chevolere.

“Start what?” she demanded.

“The extraction,” said Chevolere. He set down his wine and fixed her with a stare. His gaze

dipped down to her exposed skin. The dress was cut so low as to expose the cleavage of her breasts.

He ogled that pointedly.

She picked up her napkin and put it to her chest.

He chuckled, low in his throat.

She found herself taking a drink of the wine. Oh, why had she done that? She set the glass down

immediately. What was it that he would do to her?

She was no virgin, so she had knowledge of what men wanted from women, but whatever it was

that Chevolere wanted was something beyond her knowledge, because it was so base and unnatural.

She had no notion of what it might be, and she found that when she tried to imagine it, she could not.

Though she was not chaste, she was not experienced either, and she simply had no inkling of what it all entailed.

But whatever it was to be, the thought of it made a tight knot form in the pit of her stomach. She

gazed down at her plate and knew she would eat nothing else.

“We could avoid it, of course,” said Chevolere gently. “Tell me where to find the key.”

“No,” she said immediately.

“As you wish, then, Ziafiata.” He picked up his fork and took a small bite of his food. He chewed,

regarding her.

She clenched her hands into fists.

* * *

After dinner, Chevolere escorted her back to her room. He deposited her within the doorway and

told her to make herself ready for him, something hard glittering in his eyes, something that made her entire body feel too tight and tense.

He shut the door and she was alone.

Make herself ready for him? What did that mean?

She wouldn’t do a thing to be ready for him, not a thing.

In fact, she would leave now.

True, the tavern was not closed, but she could not stay here and allow herself to be molested by

this awful man. She turned the doorknob and threw herself into the hallway.

She started down the rickety stairs, and then she stopped.

No, she couldn’t.

She would come down the stairs right next to the stage, and everyone would see her. There was no

way she could simply run out the door. Someone would stop her. And then, it would be obvious that

her room was unlocked and she would not have another chance, because Chevolere would lock her

inside from then on.

No, she would simply have to endure this, whatever Chevolere intended to do to her, and then—

after it was over—she could escape later in the night.

Once free, she would go to Diago, and he would take care of her. Diago loved her. True, she

would be ruined by Chevolere, but perhaps that was better, because she would no longer be

marriageable material. She didn't need to marry Diago. She could be his mistress. It wouldn't matter as long as they were together. She didn't care about respectability. It was a lie, anyway. Her family wasn't respectable.

She cast one longing look down the stairs and then she slowly forced herself back into her room.

She shut the door behind herself and she began to pace, wrapping her arms around her midsection

and trying to convince herself that it could not be so bad as all of that.

Whatever she'd done with Diago hadn't been especially pleasant, though she understood that men

tended to take more pleasure in the enterprise than women. It had been a bit painful and a bit invasive, and she hadn't much liked the way he'd grunted over her or how sweaty he'd gotten.

But before, the kissing and caressing, that had been nice, and she had liked being folded into

Diago's arms, his bare skin against hers.

Maybe it wouldn't be so much worse with Chevolere after all, even though he'd said that pain

would only be the beginning. She thought she was likely fooling herself, but she paced and repeated it silently, repeated to herself that it wouldn't be so much worse, that she could bear it.

Then the door opened.

She stopped pacing.

Chevolere stood in the doorway. "You are still dressed."

“You didn’t tell me to undress,” she said.

“I said to make yourself ready for me.”

“Well, how was I suppose to know that meant to remove my clothing?”

“Take it off now.”

She shook her head.

“Because the door is open?” He stepped inside and shut the door.

“Because I don’t wish to do anything to make things easier for you.”

He nodded at this. “Yes, of course. Well, your rebellion will only make things go that much worse

for you.”

She took a step backwards.

He started for her.

She fled, going to the corner of the room, putting her back into it, holding out her hands to keep him back.

But he was there, gripping both of her wrists with one of his large hands and wrenching them up

over her head.

She struggled.

He pressed his body into hers, and he was large and strong, and her heart went wildly out of

rhythm. His other hand went to the bodice of her dress, and she found she couldn’t breathe. She fought to get air. She was immersed in terror.

“There’s a way to make this stop, Ziafiata,” he whispered in her ear.

“No,” she breathed. “No, I won’t.”

He tugged on the front of her bodice and the fabric of her dress ripped.

She flinched from him, feeling air between her breasts.

He let go of her wrists.

She opened her eyes.

He wasn’t looking at her. He had taken a step back, and he had averted his gaze.

She leaped on him, pummeling him with her fists, her breath coming in frenzied gasps.

He seized both of her wrists again, propelling them backward into the corner again.

She struggled against him, spitting in his face, bringing up her knee, aiming for his crotch.

He blocked that with his thigh, forcing his own leg between hers.

That was horrifying, and she screamed.

He held her there, and he was out of breath, too.

They panted, both of them, and he was searching her expression with his own, though what he

sought there she did not know.

“Blazes,” he gasped.

She had a strange thought now, that he was unprepared for her struggling, that he was shocked by it.

He can’t have thought I would welcome this! she thought in disbelief. Perhaps he was too used to his whore, or perhaps the other women he’d molested had been compliant because he’d paid them.

Perhaps he had simply not thought this through, and if she struggled, she could make it unpleasant for him, unpleasant enough that he might give up.

She bucked against his chest, gritting her teeth.

He sucked in a hissing breath, as if her movement had pleased him.

That hadn’t been her intention. Her struggling had also somehow made her stays go askew. She

tried to wriggle them back into place, but this only seemed to make them fall down further. Her ripped bodice fell away, exposing one of her breasts.

Chevolere’s gaze seemed to get snagged on her nakedness. He gaped at her, as if he’d never seen a

naked breast before, and his breath went ragged. His grip went loose at her hands.

She yanked one hand free and went for his eyes. She dug her nails into the skin around the eye-

holes of his mask.

He snatched her hand away, grimacing, and he pressed her more firmly into the wall.

Now, both of her breasts were visible. Her stays were hopelessly low, nearly around her waist.

She trembled with rage, and Chevolere eagerly drank in her quivering breasts. This time, he was not distracted enough to loosen his grip, however.

She cringed from him, shutting her eyes, as if shutting her eyes could shut away the reality of what was happening to her, but it couldn’t.

She felt Chevolere’s breath on her neck, and her eyes snapped open.

But he only put his mouth close to her ear and whispered, “You’re quite lovely, Ziafiata.”

She shuddered.

“It would be a shame to damage you,” he breathed.

She convulsed.

“The key.” His voice was more substantial now. There was iron in it.

“No.” Her voice, however, was thin and quavering.

Abruptly, he let go of her, taking several steps back.

She should have gone for him, leapt on him and raked her nails over his cheek, but—shamefully—

she covered herself instead. She wrapped the shreds of her dress around herself and cowered against the wall. She managed to stop short only of whimpering.

“Perhaps you need some more time to think about it,” said Chevolore. He pulled a handkerchief

out and dabbed at a spot below his eye. It came back red. “When I next come to you, I will see to it that you cannot draw blood.”

She felt a good bit of satisfaction at having hurt him. She bared her teeth at him.

“You are fierce, too,” he murmured. “You’re not what I expected.” He swallowed, and she could

have almost sworn there was something regretful in his posture…

But then it was gone, his cape swirling behind him as he strode from the room.

And when he shut the door behind himself, she heard the most horrible sound possible.

The lock being engaged.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ziafiata stared at the door for several moments, unable to believe what she'd heard.

Finally, she managed to cross the room and try the knob.

No!

Oh, she had been *free*. She had been standing on the *steps,* and she'd come back into this room and shut herself back inside and then that monster had come to her and ripped her clothes and looked at her and terrorized her and —

An agonized sob was rising in her chest, threatening to burst over her like a fountain.

She pushed it back down.

No, she could not cry. He might hear her, though how he could with that music going on downstairs

she did not know. Still, she could not cry. Crying would mean she was breaking, and she would not

break.

He didn't even touch me, she said to herself.

Well, he *had* touched her. She wrung out her wrists from where he had encircled them with his thick, strong hands.

But he hadn't touched her anywhere else. He'd only looked. And there had been no real pain,

despite what he'd promised her. His grip on her wrists had been firm and he'd been forceful with her, but she wasn't…

Well, anyway.

It didn't matter.

She was trapped here now, and she had lost her one chance to get free.

She stayed at the door, rattling the knob, for far too long.

Then she took off the shreds of her ripped clothes and stood in front of her wardrobe in her shift, trying to decide if she should dress herself again. She could give up and slip between the sheets of the bed in her shift, but what if Chevolere came back? Then she would only have this flimsy piece of

fabric between him and her naked skin, and… *no*.

She got dressed again, putting on a separate set of stays, one that laced up the front, and she

arranged them higher, lacing them tightly, mashing her breasts against her chest as if she could flatten them entirely. Then another dress over top of it all.

She went to the bed and lay on top of the blankets, staring at the ceiling.

What would she do?

Perhaps she could lie to Chevolere, tell him where the key was, but give him the wrong location.

Maybe he would be so pleased that he would leave her in an unlocked room and she could escape

then.

Of course, if he didn't, and she was locked in to wait for the result, he would likely come back to her and hurt her very, very badly in his anger.

No, she would only do that as a last resort, if whatever Chevolere did to her became too horrid to

bear.

Perhaps she would get lucky, and he'd leave the door unlocked again, or perhaps the tavern wench,

the one who was supposed to be seeing to her, perhaps she would be careless.

The next morning, when Marta Russi appeared with Ziafiata's breakfast, she was round-eyed,

looking Ziafiata over warily.

"He didn't leave any marks, then," said Marta.

Ziafiata stretched. She wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep, but she had slept fitfully, and it was dreadful to have slept in one's stays. She wanted to take them off, but they were now her armor, and she would not remove them for anything at all. "Is that what he does? I would think if he left marks on Madame Vadima, it would be talked about."

"I assume he does it to her in places where no one can see," said Marta. "Is that what he did to

you?"

"He didn't do anything to me."

Marta scoffed.

“He ripped my dress,” said Ziafiata, gesturing to where it lay in the corner. “But I think he is trying to frighten me first, make me wretched with dread for what is to happen.”

Marta nodded slowly. “That seems like something he’d do.”

“Do you enjoy working for the Beast of the Barrens?”

“He’s not a terrible employer,” said Marta, setting down the tray of food she’d brought on the floor and going to examine the dress. She held it up, looking at the rip. “It’s mostly along the seam. I think it can be repaired. I’m not good with sewing, but maybe Bellia can. She works in the kitchens.”

“I never want to wear that dress again,” said Ziafiata. She was bending at the waist to look at the tray, which contained griddle cakes and sausages along with some grapes. She did not think she could comfortably sit on the floor with her stays laced so tightly. Grimacing, she picked up the tray and took it to her bed.

“He is always good to us,” said Marta. “He pays on time. His wages are fair. I think he is only

ruthless with men who cross him.”

Zifiata let out a low, bitter laugh.

“Oh, and women, of course,” said Marta, coming across the room with the dress held to her chest.

“That, too. So, he didn’t do anything to you at all?”

Ziafiata cut a bite of sausage with her fork. She hadn’t been given a knife. Chevolere was probably afraid that she’d secret it away and use it on him the next time he came for her. “No, but he will. You have doubtless heard of his appetites.”

“Well, nothing specific,” said Marta. “I have to admit, I’m curious. Well, horrified. Did he tell you *what* he was going to do to you?”

“You have to help me get away from him,” Ziafiata said. This was a split-second decision. She

didn’t know if it would work. “Please?”

Marta took two steps back. “Me? I can’t do anything.”

“You will leave me to that monster? That beast? He will bruise me and make me bleed. He will

use me in ways that no woman should be used. You have heard the stories, just as I have, and you

have witnessed his ruthlessness. Please.”

“I…” Marta wrung out her hands. “I can’t.”

“Leave the door unlocked,” said Ziafiata. “That is all I ask of you.”

Marta licked her lips.

“You did it yesterday,” said Ziafiata.

“Did I?” whispered Marta, horrified.

“You can claim it was a mistake—”

“He will kill me,” said Marta.

“No,” said Ziafiata. “You said he was a good employer.”

“He is not rational when it comes to you, or to your father,” said Marta. “That card game with

Federo Abrusse. You have no idea what went into making sure it happened. You have no idea how he

schemed and planned and maneuvered. He will kill me if I ruin this. He wants it too badly."

"Wants to ravage me or to hurt my father?"

Marta shook her head. "I don't know, I'm afraid, I only know how important it is to him. I truly am sorry."

Ziafiata felt like crying again. She shouldn't have said anything to the girl. She went back to her breakfast.

Marta scurried out of the room, locking the door firmly behind her.

Later, she came back for the tray, and she said in a quiet voice, "He wants you to give him some

sort of information, doesn't he? Perhaps you should simply do that."

Ziafiata resolved not to speak to Marta anymore at all.

* * *

All day, Ziafiata tried to think of some way to escape, and nothing occurred to her. All day, she

waited for some opportunity.

Would she be invited to dinner again with Chevolere? If so, she would not sit quietly and eat with

him. She would take her fork and plunge it into his neck. If she was not given a fork, she would use her spoon to scoop out his eyeballs. She would fight so hard that he would be forced to give up on her entirely.

But he did not send for her. All her meals were brought by Marta, on the same tray, and she didn't

see Chevolere at all.

The sheer boredom of being trapped here was going to drive her mad, she thought. Forget

whatever torture Chevolere had in mind for her. She would likely crack because she wanted out of the room. Not that Chevolere had ever offered her any kind of freedom. If she did tell him about the key, would he simply keep her locked in the room forever?

She pondered her future grimly, and all she felt was despair and fear.

Chevolere came for her quite late, after the tavern was closed.

He opened the door and stood there, a dark masked specter, and she hated the sight of him. Despite

her resolution to fight him, she did not throw herself at him and begin to claw at him. Instead, she cowered on the other side of the room.

Wordlessly, he strode across the room and took her by the arm. He pulled her up and looked her

over. “Not dressed for bed?”

“Wouldn’t give you the satisfaction,” she said in a hard voice.

“Indeed,” he said, as if he would have expected nothing less from her. “You’re rather determined

to make this difficult, and I can’t say I don’t admire that about you. We’re going downstairs.” He

pulled on her arm.

She was so surprised by this that she didn’t fight him.

They were halfway across the room before the thought of fighting occurred to her. And then she

decided not to fight, because certainly it was better to be out of her locked room. Certainly, being downstairs was one step closer to freedom.

Most of the lights were off in the tavern, but lanterns above the stage were burning brightly,

illuminating the expanse of wood there. The harpsichord had been pushed aside and there was a chain dangling from the ceiling.

She saw it, and her knees buckled.

He hauled her up, whispering in her ear. “It doesn’t have to be this way. Tell me about the key.

This will all be over.”

She would not give him the satisfaction of standing. She forced him to bear her weight. “Over?

And you’ll lock me in that awful room forever?”

“You can go where you like,” he said, “as long as you don’t go back to your father, which I don’t

think you would do, would you?”

“I have nowhere to go,” she said. “If I betray Diago, he would never shelter me.”

“Ah, it is to him you wish to return,” said Chevolere. “Tell me, where has Diago Caputio been

these two years since he deflowered you?”

“That’s not what…” Why was she insisting it hadn’t happened?

Chevolere dragged her towards the stage. “If he wished it, he would be with you. He could have

freed you from your father and defied his family. He could have demanded that you were recognized

as his wife. He used you and shamed you, and you don't even blame him for it. Why is that?"

"He didn't do that," she said.

"You don't know the man well if you think he would ever be so loyal to you as you are to him,"

said Chevolere.

"*You* don't know him." She put her feet down on the ground now and drew herself up. "I know him far better than you ever could. What? Have you played cards with him once? Sold him cainlach? How

could you know him?"

"I have heard him speak of you," said Chevolere.

She searched his pale eyes for some emotion, but there was nothing there, and his voice was flat.

She swallowed. "And?"

"And he says vulgar things about your lack of demonstrativeness in bed," said Chevolere.

"You lie!" She did launch herself at Chevolere now, bringing up her hands to go for his face.

He was ready for her and caught her hands in his own. He forced her arms down against her sides.

"None of that, now. I suppose you will need to be restrained, after all."

Lack of demonstrativeness? What did that even mean? Was there something she had been meant to

do that she hadn’t done? It had been her first time, how was she to know—

No, this was all a lie. Diago would never have said something like that about her. If he had, it was only because he was forced to by his father, by his position in his family. She knew that what had

passed between her and Diago had been real. She was sure of it.

She was so distracted by these thoughts that she didn’t realize she was being led onto the stage

until it was too late.

But then the single chain in the midst of the wooden expanse loomed, and she began to struggle in

earnest. She couldn’t get free of Chevolere’s grasp, but she could go completely limp, refusing to

move anywhere, forcing him to drag her.

Which he did, readily enough. There were shackles attached to the chain and he attached them to

her wrists, her hands suspended high above her head.

She kicked at Chevolere.

He reached up and tugged at another chain, and it descended in front of her. Chevolere tugged it

around behind her instead, and then secured her feet in shackles too.

She thrashed about ineffectively for several minutes before deciding it was pointless and going

still.

Chevolere stood, surveying her, catching his breath. “This is all requiring much more effort than I had thought it would.”

“You thought I would welcome your filthy hands on me, then?”

“No,” he said. “I suppose I don’t have a lot of experience with it all.”

“Your whores didn’t fight,” she said. “They just refused to let you near them again.”

His jaw twitched. “Yes, something like that.” He squared his shoulders. “So, that is where you

would go. If you could go anywhere you wished, you would go to Diago Caputio.”

She only glared at him. She didn’t have to answer his questions.

“And that is why you don’t want to tell me about the key.” Chevolere took off his cape and walked

across the stage to the place where the harpsichord had been pushed against the wall. He draped the cape over the harpsichord bench and then came back to stand in front of her.

She lifted her chin in defiance. “I will fight against you until I have no more strength.”

“Mmm,” he said, expressionless. “Diago Caputio, you think he would want my leftovers?”

Her nostrils flared.

He reached out and seized her chin, leaning close. “You go to him *smelling* of me and you think he’ll embrace you?”

“He loves me,” she said. “It’s something you would never understand.”

“Yes, well,” said Chevolere. “I’m not sure it’s something you understand either.” He let go of her

chin. He drew out a dagger from a sheath at his waist.

She couldn’t help but let out a tiny cry.

Chevolere ignored her noise.

She shied away from the blade.

“Hold still, or I’ll accidentally cut you,” he said, reaching up to steady the chain that was attached to her wrists.

So, he didn’t *want* to cut her?

He grasped a handful of the sleeve of her dress and sliced into it with the knife.

Oh, now she understood. He hadn’t been able to remove her clothes before, so this was how he

was going to do it. She wanted to thrash, but she didn’t, because she was afraid of getting nicked by the blade. Instead, she stood still, seething, staring straight ahead.

He could do his worst, but she wasn’t going to react. She gazed out at the darkened tavern, at the

tables with the chairs turned upside down on them, their legs in the air. She supposed that was done so that the floor could be mopped, but she didn’t think they did that after the tavern closed, because everyone had left rather quickly after the music stopped.

No, they must do it in the morning when they came in to prepare the place.

Chevolere had cut through both of her sleeves. They hung down in ribbons, and her bodice sagged

with nothing to hold it up since she'd bound her stays so tightly, flattening her breasts. Chevolere simply gave it a tug and the dress pooled around her feet. He couldn't remove the dress entirely,

though, not with her feet chained, so he cut through the skirt and pulled it free, tossing it aside.

He stood up, surveying her.

She was wearing only her shift and her stays now. Her shift came down just below her knees. Too

much of her skin was bare.

Chevolere sighed. "You don't look pleased with the change in circumstances, Ziafiata. Must I cut

away every stitch of your clothing? Won't you simply tell me what I wish to know?"

"No," she said, and she was pleased with how firm and steady her voice was.

"All right then," he murmured. He moved closer. He put his knife to the leather straps that laced up her stays. He slid his blade into the very bottom and sliced through. "This seems uncomfortably tight, Ziafiata. Why did you do this?"

She didn't say anything.

Cutting the laces had loosened them. He parted the stays from the bottom, plucking the leather free from the grommets.

"Didn't you like it when I looked at you?" His voice was mild. "Or did it make you wish not to

even look at yourself? Did it make you wish that part of yourself didn't even exist?"

She looked at him in horror.

He continued to part her stays. “How much more unpleasant do you think it will be when I’ve

looked at every square inch of you?”

Her stays fell, hitting the stage with a weak plopping sound.

He kicked them away.

She was only wearing her shift now. It was sheer, and it parted in the front so as not to show under a low cut dress. It gapped now, almost to her navel.

He was behind her, leaning close, his voice at her ear. “Once my hands have crawled all over your

skin, once I’ve squeezed and pinched you wherever I wish, once I’ve…” He pressed his body into

hers, his pelvis into the curve of her backside, and she felt his erection. It was hard and hot and long and thick. “*Penetrated* you. What will you do with yourself, then? Hmm? I’ll have violated the most secret parts of you. There will be nothing of you left.”

That wasn’t true. There wouldn’t be *nothing* left. And he was a worse monster than she’d ever imagined. She hadn’t realized that he enjoyed causing discomfort, that he delighted in the violation of not only her body but her mind. He was wretched. She couldn’t help but tremble.

He brushed her hair away from her neck, his fingers impossibly gentle. “None of that has to

happen.”

“I won’t tell you,” she breathed.

“Then here is what I am going to do to you,” he said, his voice dark and soft at her ear. He ran the tip of the dagger up over the collar of her shift.

“I’m going to cut this away, and then you’ll be totally bared to me, and I will be able to see whatever I want. I want to see you, Ziafiata. I want that very badly.” He thrust his erection into her again.

She let out a huff of air. She was trembling worse.

“Then I will begin hurting you,” he said. “I’ll enjoy it. I like to cause pain. I will hurt you in the most intimate of places, and I won’t stop when you scream. The screaming will only make me more

aroused, do you understand that?” His hardness seemed to pulse against her.

“No,” she said, and she hadn’t meant to say it.

“No?” he said. “That’s not what you wish? Because we haven’t even gotten to the part where I

look at what’s between your thighs. Or maybe that isn’t the orifice I’ll use. Maybe I can think of more painful places to take you.” He shifted behind her, pressing into her backside in a different position.

Her eyes widened, because she had never… That wasn’t even *possible*, was it? No one did that.

“You know I don’t wish any of this!” she cried out. “That’s why you’re doing it.”

“You must wish it,” he growled at her ear. “You must, because you could stop me, and you don’t.”

“If you are so truly aroused by it all, I don’t imagine I *could* stop you,” she said in an acidic tone.

“I might tell you all about the key, and you might do it anyway.”

He backed away from her. “No.” His voice was flat. “I have a reputation for keeping my word. A

man must have some scruples.”

“Scruples?” She let out a wild laugh, sagging against her chains.

He strode around to the front of her and gathered up a handful of her shift. He sliced the dagger

through it, cutting her shift all the way down the middle.

She gasped. The sheer fabric now hung on either side of her, and her nakedness was on display.

Chevolere dragged his gaze over her, and his eyes were full of fiery desire, awful desire, and she

cringed and twisted herself and tried in vain to cover herself.

She waited for him to cut the rest of the shift away.

She waited for the pain he’d promised, the pinching and squeezing.

But it never came.

He licked his lips and sheathed his dagger and squared his shoulders. Then he turned his back on

her. He crossed to the harpsichord bench and picked up his cape. He tugged it on as he jumped down

off the stage and disappeared up the steps, leaving her there, chained up and exposed. Alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chevolere shut the door of his quarters firmly. He wanted to slam it, but she might hear that

echoing through the entire tavern, and he had already done a spectacularly terrible job at this thus far.

He didn’t need for her to understand how badly this was affecting him.

He turned around and pressed his forehead into the firm wood of the door.

He couldn’t breathe.

He ripped the blazing mask off and crumpled it in one hand.

“Yes, Vox, it’s a brilliant, brilliant plan to threaten to rape her. Brilliant, when you can’t have normal, consensual relations with a woman. As if you could possibly go through with it. You couldn’t even *touch* her.”

He turned around, sagging against the door. He slid all the way down to the floor, brought his knees up to his chest, and bowed his head.

It wasn’t supposed to go this far. He had a reputation, after all. She was supposed to find the

prospect so frightening she crumpled at the threat of it. He wasn’t supposed to have to *do* anything to her.

He had crafted the reputation himself, though there was no truth to it. He had thought it would be

commented on if people realized he was essentially one of the brothers—well, that he was as a

brother should be, anyway. It was a rare holy man of the Order of the Flamme who took his vows of

chastity seriously. The musqueteers were also supposed to be celibate, and none of them were. Most

men didn’t seem to be even capable of it.

And yet he was. He was easily celibate.

He had thought that if others knew of his strange lack of partaking in carnal delights, it would make him a source of ridicule, and he couldn’t

bear that. His reputation was important, and so he had struck the deal with Madame Vadima. He visited her twice a month, and they sat in her bedchamber and

played cards.

She spread stories about his perversions, and everyone believed them.

He far preferred everyone to think that he was ruthless than to think he was a eunuch.

Which… well, he was obviously functioning down there. He was surprised by the violence of that.

Truly, he'd never been so close to naked female flesh in his life, and he was stunned at his reaction to it. He was aroused. He was *still* aroused. He hadn't expected that. He hadn't expected to want…

Well, the wanting made it worse, actually, because of what he was doing to her. It made his skin

writhe with revulsion. What he had done thus far to her was quite bad enough even if he'd never

touched her.

He thought of how tight her stays had been.

Yes, he understood that. That was how it started.

What price would Ziafiata pay, lovely Ziafiata, beautiful Ziafiata? It would be his fault. He was

doing this to her. She was fodder in his revenge.

Maybe this revenge meant that he was no better than Federo Abrusse in the end.

But perhaps there had been no question of that, not for some time. This was the consequence of

Federo’s actions, this was what he had wrought in the world.

“You made me, Abrusse,” he whispered. “This is what cames of doing what you did.”

Of course, it wasn’t fair to Ziafiata. She was an innocent caught up in all of it.

It couldn’t be helped.

He could not undo what he’d already done to her. But, well, he knew that he couldn’t actually go

through with ravishing the girl. He was incapable of that. He had no further to go in that direction, then. His threats had not worked. She was too strong.

He admired her strength. He didn’t want to batter her until she became weak. He could hardly bear

that.

“But you have to,” he said to himself with gritted teeth.

Yes, it was true. He did.

But not *this* way.

There must be another way to get her to give up the location of the key.

He leaned against the door, toying with his mask, running the leather through his fingers, thinking.

Sometime later, decided, he stood up and tied the mask back on his face.

He left the room and descended the steps, going back to find her still there on the stage, exposed, bound, the lamps that illuminated the space burning low.

* * *

Ziafiata's arms ached. She could hold herself up on her feet and take some of the slack from the

way her arms were stretched above her head, but that hurt her feet and legs, and, when it did, she

would sag against the chain that held her, which made the shackles bite into her skin, and that became painful too.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been here, alone like this, and she began to be horrified that

Chevolere meant to leave her there all night, that she would be there when the workers came into the tavern in the morning, and that everyone would see her like this.

The horror and humiliation of that was too much for her to even consider.

When Chevolere came back down the stairs, she was relieved and grateful to see him, and she

hated him for making her feel any possible bit of gratitude toward him.

He climbed back onto the stage and advanced on her. "I find I am enjoying savoring this. The

longer I wait to have you, the more you will dread it, and the worse it will all be."

"You want it to be awful for me."

"That is precisely the sort of man that I am," he said, and he fitted a key to her shackles and freed her.

Her arms fell limply to her sides. She let out a little groan of relief.

He grimaced, tugging the sides of her shift closed over her skin and then, realizing this seemed to be hopeless, stripping off his cape. He settled that over her shoulders and began to do up several

ornamental braided fasteners on the front of it. “Let’s get you to bed,” he murmured, kneeling to

unshackle her feet.

She swayed. Her feet hurt. Her legs ached.

His fingers ran over the places where the shackles had been on her ankles.

She let out a little mewl of disapproval.

“I didn’t realize it was so tight,” he said softly. He stood up. “Let me see your wrists?”

She thought about resisting, but he was parting the cape to find one of her arms. He brushed soft

fingers over the red welt there, making a tsk-ing sound.

“My apologies,” he said. “As I said, I have very little experience with this sort of thing.”

She let out a harsh laugh. “Apologies? Do you expect me to forgive you?”

He glanced at her, and there was something regretful in his too-light eyes. “No, of course not.” He began to lead her across the stage.

Her legs weren’t steady. She collided with him, and she wanted to recoil, but he didn’t give her the chance.

He wrapped a strong arm around her and supported her, helping her off the stage and up the narrow

steps to her bedroom. He left her on the bed, with the door open, still wrapped in his cape.

She got up, ready to run, but he was back with a tiny ceramic container. He took off the lid and

began to smear a smoky-smelling salve into the welts on her wrists and ankles. Then he wrapped

them in strips of linen.

“I’ll be back to see you tomorrow,” he said.

“Are you going to ruin all my dresses?” she said, sneering at him.

“Well, I suppose that would be convenient, wouldn’t it?” he said. “If you had nothing to wear, I

wouldn’t have to remove your clothes.”

Her face twisted.

“I suppose I could just take your wardrobe,” he said, rubbing his chin.

“You’re too awful for words,” she said.

“Mmm,” he said. “Does it hurt anywhere else?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I wouldn’t tell you if it did. You’d probably derive pleasure from it.”

“Oh,” he said, nodding. “Of course.” He drew in a breath and then let it out. He crossed to the

door. But there, he hesitated in the doorway and turned back to her. “Do you have any notion of how to find Diago Caputio?”

“As if I’d share that with you either,” she said.

“Right,” he said, nodding again. “Of course,” he repeated. He sighed again, shaking his head. He

left, locking the door behind him.

Once he was gone, she threw off his cape. It was horrid, and it smelled like him, and she thought of that terrible thing he’d said to her about Diago, as if he was an animal and she was territory he was scenting.

Shuddering, she went to the wardrobe and found another shift. She didn’t bother to put on a dress

over it. Maybe there was no point. She climbed into bed and huddled into the blankets.

It was an interesting thing, however, wasn’t it?

He’d threatened to do all manner of awful things to her. But he hadn’t actually done any of them.

* * *

The next day, Marta came to bring Ziafiata’s meals again, and she needed the other woman’s help

to dress, because she only had one other set of stays, and they laced in the back.

Marta saw the linen strips on her wrists and ankles and made a face. She was subdued and

seemingly eager to get away. She barely looked at Ziafiata.

Chevolere came back that night, as the tavern was closing.

He was wearing a new cape, and he stayed on the opposite side of the room from her, lounging

against the door. “I don’t want to string you up again until your welts are healed.” He held up the ceramic container of salve. “I’ll leave this with you.”

She also stayed on the opposite side of the room. She wasn’t eager to get close to him.

“Have you been imagining what I’m going to do to you?” he said.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think about you when you’re not around.” She wouldn’t share that she had

begun to wonder if he was all talk and no action, because she was frightened that would spur him to prove that he was quite capable of taking action towards her.

His mouth quirked into a smile. “I like you, Ziafiata. Much more than I thought I would. I didn’t

consider liking you at all.”

She glowered at him. “Is that supposed to be a compliment? Because I’m not impressed.”

He chuckled.

She continued to glower.

“Oh, you might be interested to know that I heard word of your Diago. It seems he’s hosting some

sort of card tournament in an inn on Rosa Street tonight.”

Her heart leaped. So close? Why would he be in an inn when he had his own house in the city? On

the other hand, while playing cards was legal, gambling was not, and it would likely be easier for

Diago and all the others to scatter if the authorities decided to attempt to break up the tournament. So, perhaps that was why he was in the inn.

Chevolere was still smiling. He looked smug. “So, how did he convince you to marry him? Did he

offer it only when you spurned his attempts to get under your skirts otherwise?”

She gave him a withering look. “I don’t know why you persist in thinking that you can talk me into

having a low opinion of Diago.”

“It *was* that way, wasn’t it? I’m sure when you sneaked out of your house to meet him, he’d

immediately have his hands inside your bodice.”

“It was not that way,” she said.

“You did surrender your virtue to him, though.” This was stated as a fact.

“Why do you care?”

“Perhaps it’s for my conscious.” He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t want your first time to be with

something like me. As I said, I’ve come to like you.”

She scoffed.

“So,” he said. “Admit it. You are not a virgin.”

She folded her arms over her chest.

“He was never interested in anything other than getting between your thighs, Ziafiata,” said

Chevolere. “Everyone in the entire city knows this is true. *Everyone*.”

She pressed her lips together in a firm line.

“Perhaps he was a skilled lover. Is that it? Perhaps he pleased you, and you miss that.”

She looked down at the floor.

“No?”

“Are you actually going to do anything to me or just stand there flapping your lips?” she burst out with. Immediately, she regretted it. She did not wish to challenge him. It was too risky. Especially now, when she knew that Diago was so close. She must find a way out of this room tonight. Perhaps

she could wedge something between the cracks in the floor, pry up the floorboards and wriggle down

onto one of the tables below.

But Chevolere only chuckled again. “I find I’m gratified to think he didn’t please you. Blazes

knows why.”

She gave him a sharp look.

“Not that I could ever provide a woman pleasure,” said Chevolere. “Not that I could…” He

sighed. “Furthermore, I’m going to kill your father and destroy what’s left of your reputation. There’s nothing tender in our future, is there? Pity that.” He sighed. “Well, I shall speak to you again soon, I suppose. We’ll talk again of Diago Caputio then.” He pushed off the door and went through it.

When he shut the door behind himself, he *did not lock it*.

CHAPTER SIX

Ziafiata stood there gaping at the door.

What had all that been about? Why had he said those strange things to her? He had made rather

much of the idea that he was growing to like her, and then he'd acted as if he wished her to like him in return, which was ludicrous, given the way he'd treated her thus far.

Of course, he'd acknowledged that, but he'd seemed wistful about it.

Odd.

Strangely, it put her in the mind of nursery stories. There was the one about the woman who was

married off to a bear man, who was cruel to her until she tamed him with her soft caresses and then his fur melted away and underneath he was a kind prince who never misused her again.

Ziafiata knew instinctively what those stories were. They were lies told to young girls so that

when they were old enough to be sold off by their fathers to other men, to be used to arrange business deals and exchanges of land, women thought that rough men might become sweet if a woman was

patient enough and kind enough. And they served another darker narrative, to assure a woman that if she had not tamed a rough man, it was probably her own fault.

Even still, there was a raw sort of power to them. Romance in them that called to some primitive,

soft part of her soul.

Had she tamed the Beast of the Barrens? Is that what she would like to believe?

But she'd gone about it all wrong, hadn't she? In the stories, the woman tamed the beastmen by

being good and kind and soft. She'd done nothing but fight and resist.

Perhaps that, however, was the way to tame Chevolere. Perhaps a man like him wanted a woman

with some fire to her.

But she didn't want to tame Chevolere. She hated him. He was abhorrent. Everything about him

was…

She *didn't* want to tame him.

Did she?

No, if she felt anything toward that man, it was obscene. It must only be a product of some trauma

he'd written on her soul. He had *terrorized* her.

And yet she had the strange notion he'd left the blazing door unlocked on purpose.

She didn't go through it right away. Instead, she sat on the floor and peered down through the

cracks in the floor, watching as the workers set the chairs on the tables, as they extinguished the lamps, and as everything grew quiet and still.

Even then, she sat without moving for some time, waiting.

She wasn’t sure what she was waiting for, but she felt as if she must not try the door too quickly, that she must be certain that no one was left in the tavern.

Finally, she could wait no longer. She must try. And sitting here was getting her nowhere.

She tiptoed across the floor to the door.

The floor creaked, and it was monstrously loud. How had she never heard the creaks before?

Perhaps because of the music below, or perhaps it had never creaked until now.

She paused at the door, waiting, sure that Chevolere would come out at the sound of the loud

creaks.

When all remained still and quiet, she tried the knob.

For a moment, she worried it would not turn, that Chevolere *had* locked the door and that she simply hadn’t heard him do it.

But the door opened and outside, the hallway was shadowed and silent.

She crept down the narrow steps to the lower level.

These also creaked.

She attempted to go slowly, and the creaks were prolonged and loud. She attempted to go quickly,

and the creaks were a cacophony.

Finally, she made it to the bottom floor. She looked up the at steps, frightened Chevolere would be coming down them, his cape fluttering behind him, his gray eyes glowing behind his mask.

No one was there.

She darted across the floor and then stopped.

Should she go out the front door or the back door?

Well, there might be people on the street, even in the middle of the night like this. The Barrens was full of activity long after the last of the taverns shut their doors, as drunk men and women cavorted along the sidewalks.

Back door, then.

She pivoted and hurried into the kitchen.

It was empty, though there was a fire going in the stove along the far wall.

Stacks of tankards lined shelves above the counters, which were wiped down. Piles of onions and

potatoes loomed, casting long shadows. Large bowls full of rising bread dough sat out, covered in

towels.

She dashed past all of this and to the door.

The doorknob did not turn.

Oh, yes, it would be locked, but that was to lock people out. She unlocked the door and then darted through it, locking it behind her.

Outside, the air was chilly but fresh and she drew in a lungful, almost unable to believe she had

actually escaped.

It had happened. She had gotten away.

She looked up at the tavern and noted there was a light on in Chevolere's rooms.

She flattened herself against the building, her breath coming in gasps.

The light went out.

She hesitated. Had he seen her?

If he has, run, you idiot girl!

She ran.

She ran and ran and didn't stop until she'd reached Rosa Street. There was the Cruel Willow Inn,

which was bright and open, laughing people spilling out of the doors into the street.

Panting, she pushed her way through them and up to the doors.

She yanked a door open and stepped inside.

The Cruel Willow had a tavern on the bottom floor, and it was obviously about to close. Half of

the tables had the chairs sitting on top of them, and people were standing up and talking to each other, heading towards the doors.

But in the corner, a group of men sat around a table, and she caught a hint of the back of Diago's

head, which was wreathed in golden curls.

Her heart stopped.

She stared, unable to move, unable to breathe. It had been two years.

And then, miraculously, he turned, and he saw her, and his eyes widened.

She could breathe. She could move. She started toward him.

He got up from his chair. He was stunned.

She moved more quickly, practically running across the tavern. Her face broke into a smile.

He raised his eyebrows and then he smiled too. He opened his arms to her.

She ran into them, throwing her arms around his neck.

His arms came around her. “Zia,” he breathed. “I heard that you were—”

“I escaped.” She pulled back. “The Beast of the Barrens, he was awful, and he threatened me with

all sorts of awful things, but I got away from him before he got around to doing any of them, and I knew you were here, and I came to you. I have nowhere else to go. Please, you don’t have to… I

don’t need… I know I’m not the sort of girl anyone could marry. Not anymore. So, don’t send me

away. Let me stay with you?”

His lips parted. He took a breath as if he was going to say something, but then nothing came out,

and he closed his mouth. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. He wrapped his arms

protectively around her.

She burrowed into him. She felt safe, finally safe, for the first time since she’d been ripped out of Diago’s arms two years ago.

* * *

Chevolere stood just inside the back door to his tavern, waiting.

He had watched her leave, and he'd been frightened she'd see him in the window above, peering

down as she escaped, and then she might know something was afoot. But extinguishing the light

seemed to have reassured her, and she'd run off down the street as if she was being chased by the

living flame itself.

Now, he could only hope she'd gone where he'd told her to go.

It couldn't have worked out better, really. Diago's tournament happening that night, so soon after

he'd decided on his plan? It was almost as if it had been ordained by the blaze itself. Not that

Chevolere believed in such things. Why, he knew that the living flame in the musqueteers pistols was nothing more than a mixture of specific ingredients. Anyone could make the powder if they had the

right things. There was nothing magic about it at all.

Speaking of musqueteers, here was Matteo Vitio, finally.

Matteo was one of the musqueteers Chevolere kept on his own payroll. He was happy enough to

have a few on his side when he needed them. Most men of any stature in the Barrens employed

musqueteers for their own purposes. It was necessary to survive in Rzymn's underbelly.

Matteo rapped on the door and Chevolere opened the door. "You followed her?"

“I did,” said Matteo.

“And?”

“She went straight to him,” said Matteo.

Chevolere sucked in a breath of relief. He had been nearly certain she would, but he’d had a tiny

doubt that she would go to her father after all. “And what did he do?”

“He seems to have taken her back to the room he’s got at the inn,” said Matteo.

Chevolere took a step back, rubbing his chin. Hmm. Odd. All was going according to plan, but he

didn’t feel pleased. He found he didn’t like the knowledge of Ziafiata back in that man’s bed. That was annoying. His nostrils flared. “Good.” He was forceful about it. It *was* good. “Here’s what I’d like you to do. Go back to the inn, and make it known that I wish her back, and that I’m willing to negotiate with him to ensure her safe transfer.”

Matteo, to his credit, didn’t express any surprise that Chevolere had let Ziafiata go only to try to collect her again. He had been working with Chevolere long enough to know that his schemes often

had multiple layers and that there was no need to question his employer, who was doing everything

quite deliberately.

“I can do that, certainly,” said Matteo. “Do you wish to give me coin for the negotiation, and to

bring her back to you?”

“Absolutely not,” said Chevolere. “No, it will not be coin I ransom her with. Offer that first, but offer something low, so that he will refuse it out

of hand. Then, instead, offer him a substantial

discount on iubilia. Tell him I will deal exclusively with the Caputio family at that lower rate. Let's say forty percent. You can go as low as sixty if he proves reticent, but I don't think he will." Iubilia was a substance that numbed pain. It also produced a brief period of euphoria after it had been

ingested, about an hour of pure bliss. People bought it for pleasure, though that was forbidden.

Chevolere was the premiere source of the stuff in Rzymn. He had deals with the pirates that brought it across the seas.

"Forty percent," repeated Matteo. "All right. I will do as you say."

"Once he agrees, tell him that I must collect her myself, because I wish to look her over and make

sure she is not damaged. So, tell him to wait there with her and that I will be there in the morning for her."

Matteo nodded. "Of course."

"Thank you, Matteo," said Chevolere. "Report back to me when it is all settled."

* * *

Ziafiata looked up as Diago came back into the room in the inn, shutting the door behind him. He

looked a bit troubled as he ran a hand through his blond curls. He plucked at the bow at his throat, untying it so that the ribbon fell loose around his neck.

Ziafiata was sitting on the bed, because there was nowhere else to sit. The room was not large.

“What was that all about?”

“Well, that was Vox’s men, searching for you,” said Diago, unbuttoning the top few buttons of his

shirt.

“Oh,” she said.

“Yes, he is combing the Barrens for you,” said Diago. “I told them I hadn’t seen you, of course.”

“It seemed to take a long time simply to say that,” she said.

“Yes, they weren’t inclined to believe me,” said Diago.

She winced. “It’s likely my fault. I may have indicated to him that if I could go anywhere, it would be back to you. It was stupid of me.”

“No, no, don’t worry yourself about that.” Diago came over and sat down on the bed next to her.

He smiled at her. “Let’s not think about Chevolere Vox right now. Where were we?”

She felt heat rush to her cheeks.

Diago slid a hand against her jaw, and his lips came for hers.

She slammed her eyes shut against the kiss. She liked kissing Diago, but she had to admit she was

surprised that he didn’t want to discuss Chevolere anymore. If the beast suspected she was with

Diago, he would not likely give up trying to find her, and that could be problematic for them all.

Diago thrust his tongue into her mouth, and he tasted like liquor.

She recoiled a bit, on instinct, and then felt bad about it.

But Diago didn’t seem to notice. He was pressing her back into the bed, deepening the kiss

between them.

Soon, they were both horizontal, Diago’s body over hers, and he was nudging a knee between her

thighs. Her skirt was all the way down at her ankles, but even so, it made her think of Chevolere, of the way he’d been forceful with her in her bedroom. She went stiff, but Diago didn’t seem to notice that either. She pushed on his shoulders.

He pulled back. “What is it, beautiful?”

She found she didn’t want to tell him about what had happened with Chevolere. “I… I don’t wish

to cause trouble for you with Vox.”

“You won’t,” said Diago. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Well, he will know that I’m with you eventually, I suppose? You cannot hide me forever.”

“No, I won’t hide you,” said Diago. He kissed her again.

She didn’t kiss back.

This time he did notice, and he stopped. “I know what this is. You are worried that I’ll actually

take you up on that ridiculous offer of yours to be my mistress. Don’t worry, beautiful, I know you weren’t serious. We are married. You are my wife.”

Her heart squeezed. It was painful. It was joyous. “What?” Her voice was strangled.

“You heard me.” He smiled down at her and then he was kissing her again.

She opened her mouth to him, but she was stunned, and when he moved his lips to kiss a trail over

her neck, she said, “Our marriage was annulled.”

“Our marriage was consummated,” he said into her skin. “Therefore the annulment was unlawful.

You are mine.”

“Truly?” she breathed, seizing both sides of his face forcing him to look into her eyes.

“Would I lie to you, beautiful?” he said, laughing.

“Oh… Diago.” She felt as though she was bursting. “And if my father comes for me?”

“I will not give you up.”

“And if your father—”

“Stop this. We are together now, aren’t we? Let us enjoy each other. I’ve missed you. Have you not

missed me?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “I have missed you like the missing part of my soul.”

He grinned. “Me too, beautiful.” And then he was kissing her again.

The kisses were rapturous, and she surrendered to them, gasping, and she surrendered to his

roaming hands over her body. When he touched her breasts, it felt good, and she closed her eyes and arched her back and writhed against him.

But then he squeezed one of her breasts, rather a little too hard, and her breath caught in her throat, and she thought again of Chevolere, and she thought of the way he had taunted her about Diago, and

before she knew it, words were tumbling out of her mouth. “Why now?”

“Hmm?” Diago sat up and beckoned for her to sit up.

Obligingly, she sat up straight. “Well, why are you now so eager to fight your father’s disapproval when you weren’t before?”

Diago put his arms around her and worked on the buttons on the back of her dress. “When my

father forbade our union, I was practically a child, Zia. We both were. I’m older now. I won’t let him tell me what to do.”

“But… if you changed your mind about it, you could have come for me. And if you heard about

Chevolere—and I’m sure you did, because my father was sure everyone would know and he would

be humiliated—why didn’t you…?”

“Why didn’t I what?” He had finished unbuttoning her dress and now he was pulling it forward,

revealing her shift and stays beneath.

“Nothing. It’s too much to ask. Of course, Chevolere is not a man to be trifled with. He is ruthless and dangerous and—”

“Are you asking why I didn’t rescue you?” said Diago. His fingers were at the tie to her stays now, and he was loosening the knot. “Beautiful, that is

why I was here tonight. The tournament, this inn, it was all a cover so I could get close. But you beat me to it."

Her lips parted. "Oh."

He smiled at her. "I would never have left you with that beast. Of course I wouldn't. Now, if you

don't mind, I seem to remember that my wife has the prettiest pair of tits I ever laid eyes on, and I'd like to see them again now. Is that all right?"

She blushed, biting down on her lower lip. She reached up and loosened her stays herself.

He helped her remove them, and then her shift as well, so that she was completely naked, and she

was shy as he looked at her but pleased at his attention.

He caressed her breasts for a few minutes, mostly squeezing them, and she still felt he was doing it just a little too hard, and it hurt a little more than she would have liked. While he was doing that, he was unlacing his breeches.

He pushed her back on the bed and spread her thighs. He peered at her there too, looking at her

with obvious interest. And then, he was on her, pressing his hardness into her, pressing even though he hadn't even removed his own clothes, and that hurt too.

She winced.

He pulled back, and rubbed her roughly between her legs. "Hmm," he said, and then put his fingers

near her mouth. "Spit," he said.

"What?" she said, furrowing her brow in confusion.

“Spit.”

“But—”

“Do it, Zia, come on.” He was laughing at her.

So, she did, but she was confused and a little disgusted, and she didn’t feel entirely in the mood for this anymore. It didn’t feel… she didn’t know.

He transferred her saliva to her opening, and then he pressed his erection against her again, and

this time, it was slick enough that he went in easily, and it didn’t hurt.

And then he was kissing her again, and he was rocking against her, and she felt overwhelmed by it

all. She felt invaded. She felt… shouldn’t it feel good? Maybe it did feel good, and she simply wasn’t allowing herself to feel it.

She shut her eyes and tried to concentrate.

But now, it was only starting to hurt, because whatever slickness had been between their bodies

seemed to have dried up.

Mercifully, he was quick. It was only a few more moments of that before he was grunting over her.

He thrust twice and then came out of her and pressed himself into the softness of her belly. Then he spurted all over her skin.

She was alarmed by this. She gaped down at her body in something like horror. Why had he done

that?

“Best not to risk a child, I suppose,” he said in a rough voice. He snatched up her shift from the

floor and used it to mop up the ejaculate on her belly. Then he tossed it aside and lay down, gathering her into his arms.

She lay there, stiffly, surrounded by him, and he was just as sweaty as he’d been on their wedding

night, and he was going right to sleep as well. He was lightly snoring within moments.

She took several deep breaths, and she tried not to think about why a husband wouldn’t want to get

his own wife with child.

It was some time before she fell asleep.

* * *

Chevolere looked Diago Caputio over. The man was standing in the hallway at the Cruel Willow,

having just come out of the door he was standing in front of. Across the hallway, there were guards averting their eyes from Diago’s state of undress. Diago was only wearing his breeches. He shrugged into his shirt and began buttoning it up over his chest. It was morning.

“Where is she?” said Chevolere.

“I’ll leave her to you,” said Diago, gesturing to the door.

“Oh, no,” said Chevolere. “You’ll explain to her exactly what’s happening, what you’ve done.”

Diago made a pained face. “That wasn’t part of the negotiation.”

“Well, it is now,” said Chevolere, lifting his chin.

“She’s sleeping,” said Diago. “She’s very tired. I expect I wore her out. You seem awfully

interested in this girl, who—might I say—is rather thoroughly *mine*. She told me you had her for days and didn’t do anything to her.”

“Whereas you, on the other hand, wasted no time in using her,” said Chevolere. “If she’s asleep,

wake her up.”

“You wake her up.”

Chevolere didn’t like Diago’s tone. He reached under his cape and took out his dagger.

“Are you going to threaten to stab me? Truly? I have Caputio men lining this hallway—”

“Have you ever heard the story about me and Luco Bellicio?”

Diago’s expression went flat. “Likely embellished, I wager.”

“What have you heard?” said Chevolere, running his finger lightly over the edge of the blade. “I’ll tell you if it’s embellished or not.”

“They say you talked him into stabbing himself in the gut.”

“Mmm,” said Chevolere. “It went exactly that way.”

“Liar,” said Diago, but his voice was different now.

“I told him,” said Chevolere, “that I had sent my musqueteers to his house and that they were there with his pregnant wife and his small daughter, and that if he didn’t do as I asked, his family would pay the price.”

“You would have killed a child in the womb?” said Diago, and his voice was quieter still.

Well, no, it had all been an elaborate bluff. Chevolere only smiled. “What do you think?”

Diago looked at his feet. “What do you want with Zia?”

“More than what you want from her, apparently,” said Chevolere. “Open the door.”

Diago lifted his gaze. “I don’t believe the story about Luco. I think it’s all a lie. I don’t think half the things they say about you are true.” But he turned and opened the door and stepped back into the room.

Chevolere followed him. Just inside the door, there was an empty table sitting against the wall. He set the dagger down on it, the naked blade a warning should Diago forget that it was there.

Ziafiata was sitting up in bed, eyes wide, clutching the covers to her chin. “Diago? What’s going

on? Why is he here?”

Diago’s shoulders slumped. “Is this really necessary, Vox?”

“Let’s go out and let her put some clothes on,” said Chevolere, who was ashamed of how

distracting he found her bare shoulders. He felt as if every curve of her nude body had been engraved on his brain now. He found her too lovely for words, and yet, everything about it was ugly. His

actions towards her. His wanting her at all. What men did with women was beastly. He knew

sometimes women consented to it, but that didn’t make it—

“I don’t have… my shift got… something on it,” said Ziafiata. “I don’t have anything else to wear.”

Diago strode over to his trunk and tugged out one of his own shirts. He tossed it to her.

She caught it, snatching it deftly out of the air, but the blankets fell down and Chevolere caught a glimpse of one of her perfect breasts.

He felt as if hot flame licked through him. He went rigid and then turned around. “We’ll go out and let her dress. She should have some dignity for this.”

“You don’t care about my dignity,” said Ziafiata. “And even though you’ve found me, Diago won’t

let you have me. He was coming to take me away from you anyway. If I hadn’t escaped, he would

have come for me.”

Chevolere turned back around. “Is this what he said to you?” He was shocked, truly shocked.

Ziafiata was out of the bed, only wearing Diago’s shirt, which came down nearly to her knees. She

looked ridiculous and very, very young.

Chevolere still felt ignited by flame, but the fire wasn’t shameful desire anymore, it was anger. He rounded on Diago. “Did you say that to her?”

Diago scratched the side of his neck, meeting neither Chevolere’s nor Ziafiata’s gaze.

“Tell her the truth,” said Chevolere.

“You don’t know what I had planned,” said Diago petulantly.

“I know you wouldn’t have sold her back to me if you were intent on mounting some sort of rescue

attempt.”

“Sold?” repeated Ziafiata in a tiny voice.

“Tell her,” said Chevolere, glaring at Diago.

“Why do *I* have to tell her?” said Diago. “I won’t. *You* tell her.”

“You tell her,” said Chevolere, “or the entire deal is off.”

“What deal?” said Ziafiata.

“Zia,” said Diago, going to her, taking her by the shoulders, “beautiful, you know how I feel about you, but Vox controls all the iubilia that comes into the city, and the Caputio family buys it from him to distribute. He’s offering us such a cut on the price that… I couldn’t say no. And when my father

discovers what I’ve negotiated, he’ll be grateful, and there’s no telling what he might do. Try to

understand, I do care about you. I think you’re… really, really beautiful and a very sweet girl, and I’m sorry, for whatever it’s worth.”

Ziafiata was stunned. The stupid huge shirt was hanging off of her, and she was staring at him with wide, pained eyes.

You did that to her, Chevolere thought.

“When?” she said to Diago. “Did he come this morning?”

No, Diago did it. I only showed her, he answered himself.

“Last night,” said Diago. “When I told you that I told him I didn’t know where you were, I was

negotiating the deal.”

“Before?” Her voice broke. “Before we…” Her lower lip started to tremble.

You showed her in the cruelest way possible. And for your own purposes. You really are a beast.

He turned away from her shattered expression.

“I wanted us to have one more night together,” said Diago.

“But you lied to me.” Ziafiata’s voice was growing stronger. “You told me that I was your wife.

That I was *yours*.”

“I didn’t *lie* to you exactly,” said Diago. “It is true that our marriage never ought to have been annulled, so you are still mine in that way.”

“Except you don’t want to keep me,” said Ziafiata in a hard voice. “Not if you can profit from me

instead.”

“Oh, don’t be that way about it,” said Diago. “You were raised the same as me. Family first. Duty

first.”

“It’s not that I come second to you, Diago,” she said. “It’s that I don’t matter at all. Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“Does everyone know that you only married me to bed me?” she said.

“Who told you that?” said Diago.

“You certainly were only interested in that from me last night,” she said, drawing herself up. “You would have said anything to convince me,

wouldn’t you?”

“It wasn’t exactly hard to convince you,” said Diago. “You wanted it just as badly as I did.”

“Did I?” She barked out a laugh. “Did I really want to be mauled and squeezed and hurt? You

didn’t do anything *with* me, Diago, you did it *on* me.” She marched across the room and snatched up the dagger that Chevolere had left on the table by the door.

“Ziafiata,” said Chevolere, alarmed.

Ziafiata advanced on Diago, brandishing the knife.

“Oh, don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?” said Diago, shaking his head. “What did you

expect, truly, Zia? Did you really think I could be married to you? Even back then, you must have

known it could never last.”

Ziafiata made a slashing motion with her arm. The knife glinted as it slid through the air. Diago

gurgled, hand to his throat.

Chevolere moved forward. “Ziafiata?”

Red liquid was spurting between Diago’s fingers. His eyes were bulging. He went down on one

knee, face going purple.

Chevolere reached Ziafiata and he tugged on her arm.

She shoved him off.

Diago’s hand fell away from his neck, as he crumpled lifelessly. Blood continued to spurt out of

his neck.

“Blazes,” said Chevolere. He hadn’t expected *that* to happen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ziafiata looked down at her hand. She was holding the dagger still and there was a fine mist of red droplets all over her skin.

She furrowed her brow.

Her lips parted.

She felt as if she was down a long tunnel, and that everything going on in the room around her was

far, far away. Even the sound was distorted.

Chevolere was speaking to her, but she couldn’t make out any of the words.

He pried the dagger out of her hand.

At first she tried to fight him off, and then she didn’t have the energy for it. She released her grip.

She looked down at her bare legs and the shirt of Diago’s that she was wearing. The fine mist of red droplets were there too.

She touched one of them on her hand. It smeared.

She brought her finger up to her face and looked at it.

The room smelled like metal.

Blood, she thought.

She drew in a breath and let it out, and it seemed as if she rushed back through the tunnel at high speed and slammed back into herself, back into normalcy. Everything was very, very normal, and that was somehow wrong. After what had happened, things shouldn't be normal. Perhaps things should

never be normal again at all.

"He lied to me," she found herself saying to Chevolere. "He manipulated me. He must have been

doing it all along, as you told me. You were right about him." She turned to look at Diago's crumpled form, which was awful to look at. There was a pool of sticky red blood around his head. It was

seeping into his clothes. His neck was gaping open, blood glistening there. She cocked her head to

one side, taking in the sight of him. She wanted to look away, but no, she had done this, and she must look at it. "I suppose I shouldn't have done that, should I?"

"Well," said Chevolere in a low voice, "I can't say the world will miss him, and I'm happy not to

have to give over iubilia to the Caputios at a loss, but it does leave us in a bit of a predicament."

"It does?" She looked back at him.

"Yes, because he does have men very close by, some in the hallway," said Chevolere.

"Oh," she said. "Well, I'm sorry about that."

He was gaping at her.

"Stop looking at me that way," she said. "I won't have it. You, of all people, cannot judge me." She turned back to Diago's body. She should be

feeling something now, some sort of guilt or regret. Or

even some satisfaction at having dispatched him, having hurt him the way he'd hurt her. And yet, there was nothing.

"I am trying to stop looking at you," said Chevolere in that same low voice. "But I am not quite

managing it, I admit."

"You are perhaps regretting the lengths you have gone to purchase me," she said. "I'm not what you

thought I was when you paid for me."

"You're not," he agreed. "But I don't regret anything, and I'd prefer if you didn't say such things."

"What things?"

"That you'd been purchased," he said. "You are not a thing."

"Aren't I?" she said. "Isn't that how you treat me? That is, in fact, how everyone treats me."

"I'm very sorry," said Chevolere. "Are you going to cut *my* throat? I would deserve that."

"You took the dagger."

"Ah, yes, I did. That was rather intelligent of me." He smiled at her. He had not stopped gaping at her. "Has anyone ever told you that you are magnificent?"

She was *not* blushing at that, not now, not over the body of the man she'd thought of as her soul mate, a man who had never cared for her at all, not from the words of another man who was even

worse than the one she'd killed. She swallowed, willing the heat in her cheeks to fade. "In fact, no. I have never been told such a thing."

"Well, you are breathtaking," said Chevolere. "I…" He shook his head slowly. "The fact remains

that we are still in this predicament." He took off his cape and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"That might do to hide the blood stains."

The cape smelled like him. It should have been abhorrent, but it was better than the coppery smell

that permeated the air. She huddled into it, and she suddenly felt a bit unsteady. She reached back and gripped the foot rest of the bed for balance. "Can you not simply fight your way out? You are said to be ruthless, are you not?"

"Well, most of the things they say about me are quite embellished," he said. "I'm not entirely

worthless with a weapon, it's true, and I did bring a sword." He touched it. "But I would be rather badly outnumbered, and I think it's not likely I'd prevail. Perhaps I could distract them while you got away. I'm sure they'll blame me for his death."

She was quiet.

"I would truly do that for you," he said. "You inspire a bit of gallantry within me, oddly, though I can't imagine you appreciate it. Even so, you should. I would never offer to die for anyone else. It's not a small thing. I'd like you to at least acknowledge it, if you don't mind."

She let out a disbelieving laugh. "I don't suppose I owe you anything, Chevolere. Even if you did

die for me, it would not balance the scales between us."

“No, I suppose not.”

“Besides, I’d rather you didn’t die,” she said. “Because I have nowhere to go, except with you.”

She paused. “Perhaps you wouldn’t want me to go with you, though.”

“Oh, I would indeed,” he said. “I wouldn’t insist on it at this point, though. I think I have done with keeping you captive, actually. For what it’s worth, I found it all rather distasteful, and I hate that I made you… something broke in me when I saw how tightly you’d laced those stays. Why did you

have to be so loyal and brave and blazingly stubborn? I never wanted to be forced to do things like that to a…” He shook himself. “There’s no time for this right now. Fine, then, if I live, you are quite welcome to stay with me.”

“Good,” she said. “And there will be no locking me up or cutting off my clothing or hurting me for

your pleasure or anything of that nature.”

“I don’t actually derive pleasure from—” He coughed, seeming to think better of this. “Yes,

agreed. The fact remains, I am still very likely going to be killed by Diago’s men. But, let’s make an attempt anyway, shall we?” He offered her his arm.

“Oh, don’t be foolish,” she said. “We can do better than that.”

“We can?”

“Listen to me closely,” she said. “This is what we will do.” And she began to explain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chevolere threw open the door, backing out, screaming at the top of his lungs. “She’s possessed.

She’s gone wild!”

The Caputio guards were in a cluster, glaring at the door as if they suspected something. Had they

heard sounds of a struggle? Had there been sounds? Well, no matter.

Chevolere flung himself at the men. “Her strength, it’s unparalleled. There must be an evil spirit

that has taken over her. She got my weapon. You must stop her.”

Ziafiata appeared in the doorway, swinging Chevolere’s sword, her hair in her face, which was

smeared in blood. She bared her teeth and let out a shriek that chilled Chevolere.

She was rather good at this, wasn’t she?

“Chevolere, I will have your blood.” She lunged for him.

Chevolere darted behind one of the men. “For the blaze’s sake, stop her.”

The man, however, stared at Ziafiata in horror, and when she came for him, he moved out of the

way, muttering a litany the brothers taught.

Ziafiata was coming for Chevolere, growling.

Chevolere let out a throaty scream. “Demoness!” he cried and then went running down the hallway

with Ziafiata hot on his heels.

No one even gave chase.

Once they were around the corner from the inn, Chevolere stopped running and settled into a walk.

Ziafiata fell into pace with him. She was laughing. “Oh, did you see their faces?”

“They were terrified of you,” he said, also laughing, taking off his cape again and handing it to her.

They’d determined that she wouldn’t come running out wearing the cape of the man she was trying to

kill, but now she was walking the streets in only a bloody shirt, and he thought she was likely a bit cold.

She took the cape and wrapped it around her shoulders, huddling inside, but still grinning, her face radiant. “I suppose it will be a blow to your reputation, having been bested by a mere woman.”

“A demoness,” he corrected. “And I can repair my reputation. I can do nothing if I’m dead. Thank

you. Your plan was quite good, and you executed it perfectly. What I said before about your

magnificence?”

She lifted her chin. “Yes? What about that?”

“Well, I am in awe of you,” he said. And again, he found it hard to take his eyes away from her,

even though she was covered in blood—perhaps *because* she was covered in blood.

She really *was* magnificent. Such strength, such fierceness, such ruthlessness. If there was a beast in him, perhaps there was one in her as

well. He forced himself not to stare at her.

When they reached the tavern, his employees had already arrived and were beginning to ready the

place to open in several hours. He immediately called Marta over and told her to see to Ziafiata, who would need some attention.

He went to his own chambers and changed his clothes, because there was some blood on them as

well. He washed his hands in a basin. And then he waited for some time, until he was sure that

Ziafiata would have had time to bathe.

He knocked on the door to her room.

“Marta?” came Ziafiata’s voice from within.

“It’s me,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, come in, then.”

He stepped inside. She was still in the bath, which was sitting in the middle of the room. One of

her legs was draped over the side and soap suds clung to her toes and her knee. Her leg was the shape of beauty incarnate. His mouth was dry.

He backed up. “I will come back when you’ve finished with the bath.”

“Why does it matter?” she said.

“Why does it *matter?* ” he repeated in a disbelieving voice.

“It’s not as if you haven’t seen everything already,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“I suppose,” he said. “But that was… different. It was a trespass against you.” He was, of course,

still staring at her perfect, bare leg, at the way her calf curved, at the loveliness of her toes. He had not ever even given any mind to toes, but she had *lovely* toes. He should stop staring at her, especially at her bare skin, because he had been monstrous to her, and it wasn’t right to stare. He really should stop.

She leaned her head against the lip of the tub. Her hair was wet. Her shoulders were bare, but the

suds covered her chest, her breasts. “You didn’t mean it, though, I suppose. It was all in service of trying to find out the location of the key.”

Blazes, thinking about her nudity made his body tighten in the worst of ways. He couldn’t endure

this. “I really must go.”

“Wasn’t it?” she said.

He bowed his head, rubbing his hand against the back of his neck. “Yes, I do wish to know about

the key, of course, but we needn’t talk about it right this second. If you will find me when you are dressed, that would be better.”

“You don’t want to look at me now?” she said.

He raised his gaze to her. “It’s not necessary to threaten you in that way anymore. I wish I hadn’t done it at all, in fact. I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, a good man, but that was rather the lowest I believe I’ve ever sunk. I am not proud.” He squared his shoulders. “I’ll leave you now.” And then, somehow, he tore his eyes away from her and left the room.

* * *

Ziafiata was still waiting to feel something, but—at present—all she felt was relief at how good

the warm water of the bath felt.

She felt no pleasure in having killed Diago. Indeed, she wasn't even sure how it had happened.

She certainly didn't know anything about how to slit a man's throat. She'd never done it before. And she didn't think she'd struck out with the intention of doing it.

She wasn't certain, though. Everything about it all was blurry.

The last thing she remembered feeling was a white-hot rage. It had eclipsed a painful feeling, her

heart shattering like glass when Diago had admitted that he'd been planning to give her back to

Chevolere all along, and that he'd said those things to her simply so that he could get her clothes off and pry her legs apart. He had used her. She had been nothing to him, and he'd been willing to pretend to love her. He'd made her promises, and he had been *lying*.

She'd never had anyone care about her, not truly, so she didn't know why she had expected that

Diago did. It shouldn't have come as such a shock.

But it did.

Maybe that made it hurt worse, because she also felt so stupid. So blazingly stupid. How could she

have thought that Diago would marry her or that he would defy his family for her? How could she

have thought he would rescue her from Chevolere?

It was foolish.

All of it was foolish.

The pain of all it had been too great, and so the rage had come. It had washed through her and

saved her, and it had propelled her forward for the dagger and then…

Then it was done.

Now, she felt nothing.

Why had she come back here with Chevolere? It was true that she had nowhere else to go, and he

did have a reputation of being ruthless, so she didn't think anyone else would try to hurt her if she was with him.

It was probably that stupid, stupid thought process she'd had about taming him.

He was different now. He seemed to take every opportunity to flatter her. And he'd said he

wouldn't hurt her anymore. He was even apologetic and regretful, and he was good at it. She was

tempted to think he was sincere.

The man was a liar, though. She couldn't believe anything he said.

He was using her, just as Diago had been. But at least Chevolere was honest about using her, and at least she knew what he was using her for.

He wanted revenge against her father. She didn't mind. She hated her father as well.

Perhaps she could allow herself to enjoy his flattery, even if he was probably only doing in order

to manipulate her in some other way. She had loved Diago with a pure, innocent love and it had all

been tainted.

This false flattery that Chevolere offered, it was perhaps all a person like her would ever get.

She was not meant for nursery tales and beast men turned kind.

She was only meant for lies and darkness and blood. She didn't mind this either. For the first time in her life, she felt strong.

She got out of the bath and dressed herself. She had no more stays, however. They had all been

ruined or lost. But she did have one dress that had a bodice that laced up the front. It wasn't boned or supportive, but she was able to at least pull the laces tight enough that she wasn't flopping about uncomfortably. Perhaps the fabric clung in an indecent way, but—as she'd said—Chevolere had

already seen everything, so she didn't care.

She went looking for him in his rooms, but he wasn't there, so she went downstairs. He was in the

corner, speaking with one of the musicians, who was gesturing above his head as he spoke in an

animated voice.

She approached.

"What's this going to cost me?" Chevolere was saying.

“Any costs will be made up in the increased profits you make selling drinks. If we do this, we will pack the place,” the musician was saying as he gestured around the tavern.

“Yes, the last time you said that—”

“That was last time,” said the musician. “This *will* be popular, though. Ask anyone. They have all gone to see the show at the Magnifica. Ours will top theirs.”

“Mmm,” said Chevolere. “Well, work up a cost sheet for me, and—Ziafiata.” His gaze swept her,

settling on her breasts and seeming to get stuck there. He flinched, clenching a hand into a fist, and then he turned back to the musician. “We’ll discuss this later.” He pushed past the man and went to her. He seized her arm and his fingers dug painfully into her skin as he dragged her back towards the steps. “What is wrong with you?”

“That hurts!” she cried.

He let go of her immediately, putting up both his palms, as if in surrender. “My apologies.”

She rubbed her arm.

“I would… prefer you don’t wear that dress. The way it, er, adheres to you leaves little to the

imagination.”

“It’s not the dress,” she said. “It’s the fact that I have no more stays. You cut one set off me, and the other I left in Diago’s room. I am without undergarments, and I don’t see what you expect me to do.”

“Oh,” he said, swallowing. “Well, we can remedy that, I’m sure. My apologies again. I should not

have…” He shut his eyes. “You unnerve me, Ziafiata.”

“Oh, do I.” Her voice was flat.

“Yes.” He opened his eyes. “Nevertheless, there is no excuse for hurting your arm. I shall

endeavor to correct my behavior in the future.” He gestured. “Let us go upstairs to talk, if you don’t mind.”

She shrugged. “Fine.” She went up the stairs, and he followed her.

He indicated that they should go into his quarters, and so she did, and they sat down together at the table where they’d shared a meal.

He looked everywhere except at her. “You have no reason to protect Diago now. You will tell me

about the key.”

Understanding suddenly dawned on her. “You let me leave. You *did* leave the door unlocked on purpose.”

“Yes,” he said to the table.

“You knew I’d go to Diago, and then you immediately made an offer for me, and you left me there

overnight, because you wanted him to take me to bed and break my heart.”

“I didn’t think he’d tell you he had plans to rescue you or promise that you were his bride,” said

Chevolere. “I certainly didn’t think you’d kill him, not that I can blame you, and not that he didn’t deserve it.”

“Everything you did to me…” She sucked in a breath. “You said that you do not derive pleasure

from causing women pain?”

“I…” He traced the wood grain on the table. “I have never before done to a woman what I did to

you. The stories about the harlots, they are fiction. I do visit Madame Vadima, but all we do is play cards. However, I made it plain to you how I reacted when I inflicted such things on you, did I not? It excited me. So, in the end, I suppose I’m no different than any other man in that respect.” He sounded disgusted with himself.

She considered this. He was still playing at being apologetic and regretful. He still sounded very

sincere, and she almost wanted to believe him. This was likely calculated, too, however. “I’ll help you even if you don’t pretend to be wretched about it. I want you to know that,” she said. “The key is kept under a loose stone in the cobblestone walkway to the fortress. Count six stones from the left edge and then count six stones in the adjacent direction, away from the gate. When you reach that

stone, you will find it loose, and you will find the key hidden within a hollowed-out chamber. There.

You have what you wish from me, don’t you? You can cease all your charades.”

He raised his gaze to her. “I’m not pretending to be wretched about it.”

She sighed. “All right. We’ll play it that way. I will pretend to believe you if it makes you feel

better.”

He looked away. “Perhaps I am not so wretched as I could be. Your body, I cannot stop thinking

about it. Every part of you is lovely and perfect. It would be a shame to damage you, as I said, and yet some part of me…” He grimaced.

She blinked at him, unsure of what to think of this. *Was* he truly sincere?

Perhaps he was actually attracted to her. He *had* been been physically aroused when he was

removing her clothing. There was no way to feign that. Maybe he wasn't feigning any of this.

She shrugged. "Well, I am already damaged, if it comes to that. I am no untouched maiden, as you

well know. Perhaps, if it is something you truly wish to do, we could discuss it."

His gaze snapped up to hers. "What?"

"Perhaps it could be a trade. My body for… well, let me think of what I might want from you, and

__"

He was horrified. "Don't say such things. What is wrong with you?"

There was no emotion in her voice. "Rather a lot, I think. A great deal of things are wrong with

me." As long as Chevolere truly had no interest in causing her pain, she supposed she didn't mind.

Maybe she was even a bit curious, because Chevolere did seem so eager for her. Diago had been

eager, too, but he'd never called her breathtaking and he'd never looked at her the way Chevolere

did.

If Chevolere was sincere in his attraction, it was… well, almost a pleasant thing. Some part of her enjoyed it.

“You…” Chevolere’s voice was hoarse. “You can’t want me, not after what I put you through.”

“As long as you don’t cause me pain, I’m sure I can endure it,” she said. “Maybe if you were more

attentive than Diago was, it could be somewhat enjoyable, even. I’m told some women do enjoy it.”

“No,” said Chevolere.

“No?” She cocked her head to one side. “But I thought—”

“Don’t bargain yourself in that manner,” he said. “Never do that.”

“Excuse me, but didn’t you bargain me to Diago in that manner?” Her voice was acerbic.

Chevolere flinched. “I have no interest in bedding you.”

“Oh, now you’re denying it?” She didn’t understand this man.

“Perhaps there’s interest, then. I’ll admit that. But it will never occur.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I will not do *anything* to you. In fact, you will stay clear of me. You will get proper

undergarments, and you will not parade around with your body showing, and that will be that.”

“If that’s the way you want it.” Her tone was light, but she felt a little disappointed for some

reason. And she was very, very confused. Did he want her or didn’t he? Why had he refused her

offer?

“I have what I want from you,” he said. “The location of the key.”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s all you want.” Her voice mocked him.

His nostrils flared. He got up from the table. “I promised that you could stay here, and that you

would not be locked up or abused in anyway, and I will keep my word. You may stay as long as you

like. If other people think I am ravishing you, so much the better, but I don’t need you to pretend that.

Our business is entirely concluded.”

She nodded, gazing up at him. “Of course.”

He took a step toward her and then stopped. He pressed a palm against the table. “Listen, you

should… bargaining away your body to something like me, it’s… you mustn’t—there will be nothing

left of you.”

That was what he had said to her when she was chained up on that stage, when he was threatening

all manner of vile things to her. She stiffened, because at the memory of all that, she remembered how much she had despised him. But such a sharp feeling as that sort of hatred… she didn’t feel anything like that, not anymore, not since she’d looked down at Diago’s blood spattered over her skin.

“I think there would be something left,” she said caustically. “You give yourself too much credit if you think whatever is between your legs could destroy me.”

He swallowed. He gazed down at his hand, where it rested on the table. “You don’t know,” he

whispered.

“And you do? I thought you’d never done something to a woman like what you’d done to me.” She

was still mocking him.

He retreated. “I *can’t* do anything to a woman, any woman,” he muttered.

She furrowed her brow. What did he mean by that?

He winced. “Blazes. Never mind.” He turned and stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER NINE

Chevolere didn’t speak to her again that day.

He couldn’t understand what had driven her to offer herself up to him the way she had. It had

appalled him to see her so cavalier about it, so emotionless.

She had been through an ordeal, he decided. He had hurt her, badly hurt her, but then some other

man—a man she’d loved and trusted—had betrayed her. And Chevolere had been kind to her in the

wake of that, and she was confused. She had no one else to turn to, so she thought she…

He had ruined her. It was his own fault.

But her offer…

Blazes, why did thinking of it make him aroused again? Bile rose in his throat. He had thought it

was bad all these years to feel nothing but disgust for anything sexual, but this was worse, because the disgust wasn't gone, but there was also desire that had never been there before.

Well, maybe he'd never given it much of a chance to be there. If there was bare skin, he averted his eyes. If a woman tried to sit on his lap, he moved her. And none of them did, not once his reputation was securely in place. He didn't look. He didn't touch. He didn't think about doing those things.

But now, oh, now everything was falling apart. *He* was falling apart.

He called Matteo Vitio back in as soon as he could, along with another of his musqueteers, Pietro

Lasa. He informed them of the location of the key, and he told them to use it to get into the Caputio fortress and to free Geolli Varti, who had been held captive there for the past seven years.

Geolli was a cousin of Federo Abrusse, though he did not have the Abrusse name, since he traced

his bloodline on his mother's side.

Springing him was part of the plan, one of the last, most important bits of the plan.

Chevolere sent them both off and then he waited.

News came from Matteo that they had both been called up on a tour of watch duty, and that they

would not be able to go to the fortress until they were finished in a week's time.

Chevolere wasn't pleased, but he had no recourse other than to hire other musqueteers to do the

activity, and he didn’t trust anyone as well as he trusted Matteo and Pietro. So, he waited.

He asked Marta to see to clothes for Ziafiata, and the wench acquiesced but then lingered, gazing

at him for so long that he finally snapped at her, asking what was the matter.

“Are you done with her then, sir?” said Marta. “Did you only wish to use her once?”

“This is not a conversation I wish to have with you,” he said.

“She seems all right now,” said Marta. “But I don’t think… pardon me, sir, but just because you

can take something from someone doesn’t mean you should.”

“I’m well aware of such things,” he said to her. “Leave me.”

He did not spend time with Ziafiata in the days that came. He did not eat with her or converse. But when he saw her, they were polite. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. She did seem all right. She was making friends with the people who worked at the tavern, especially the singers and musicians

and dancers. One night, he found her traipsing about with her face garishly painted with stage paint, and she laughed and said the dancers had gotten hold of her, and did he like it?

“Yes,” he said, gazing at her. He always liked the way she looked. He had liked her afraid and

liked her spattered in blood, liked her pretending to be possessed by a demon and liked her in the

bath.

“Anyone else would say it made me look like a whore,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But I like it just the same.”

“You’re horrible, Chevolere.”

“Can you doubt it?” He smirked.

She laughed, a musical sound, and then she whirled away, winking at him.

He gazed after her and his entire body throbbed.

* * *

Ziafiata found Chevolere impossible to understand and so she determined to stop thinking of him at

all. He had kept his word, and she was not locked in her room, nor was any impediment placed on her movement throughout the tavern. She was not prevented from leaving either, so far as she could see, but she did not leave, because, as she’d said, she had nowhere to go.

The situation here could not continue forever, she supposed, but she didn’t think of that either,

because she was enjoying her newfound freedom. Under her father’s roof, everything had been

regimented, so it had been practically like being held captive anyway. Also, she was never sure when her father’s temper would flare, and then he would punish her in some fashion or other, which meant she lived in uncertainty and anxiety much of the time.

So, this was far superior to anything she’d been through.

Soon, her days fell into a predictable pattern. She rose late, because she was always up late the

night before. It was impossible to sleep in the tavern until the entertainment ended, anyway. Too much noise. Whereas before, she'd been confined to her room, now she spent the day amongst the workers

of the tavern.

When she rose in the late morning, Marta was usually there to help her with dressing—mostly just

with lacing her stays and any buttons that she couldn't reach herself. Then Ziafiata would go down

into the kitchens, where she would watch as the workers there prepared stews and meat pies. If she

asked, they would allow her to assist them. They all seemed to like that she was eager to learn about what they were doing. And, of course, she was always allowed to taste everything here and there as

the cooking commenced, which was how she broke her fast.

Once the tavern opened, she spent her time flitting back and forth between watching the

entertainment and chatting with the dancers and performers who weren't on the stage at the time. She was fairly certain these women had taken to her as a sort of pet, or perhaps a living doll. They

enjoyed fussing with her hair and painting her face and laughing when she said things they deemed

adorably innocent.

She didn't mind that they treated her thus. She rather enjoyed it, in fact. She had not been cosseted much of her life, and this was a bit of a welcome change.

Sometimes, in the evenings, she would beg some ale from the man who tended bar, whose name

was Luigio. He had a thick neck and a thick mustache. He would give her what she wished, but he

would typically cut her off at some point in the night, telling her that pretty things such as she should be careful to keep their wits about them.

With the ale coursing through her, she would dance to music or join in on a card game with some of

the patrons of the tavern. She would pretend to know nothing of cards, though she had learned on her father's knee as a child. He could be indulgent sometimes, even affectionate, which only made it more painful when he was cruel. She thought he'd likely taught her cards to amuse himself. He thought it was funny that his little daughter could gamble like a criminal. At any rate, she would pretend to be very stupid about the games, and then the men playing would take pity on her, and then she would turn the tables on them and take all their money.

Of course, word began to spread, and now the games she was playing were not quite the same,

because she had the respect of the other players. In the end, she supposed she liked that better. It was a more even playing field.

She rarely saw Chevolere, and when she did it was from across the room. Sometimes, she looked

up and caught him staring at her, and his light gray eyes were the only expressive part of his masked face. But what they were expressing, she could not say.

She did not understand him at all.

She liked it when he looked at her for some ridiculous reason. She didn't know why, because it

was preposterous.

But she had liked it when he said she was magnificent, and she had liked it when he had told her

that she was lovely, and she liked the way he gaped at her now, as if he was in awe of her.

She did not know why he'd said he couldn't do anything to women. She had heard of there being

some kind of dysfunction with men's organs, but she'd felt his pressed into her skin, and it seemed to be fully functional.

No, it was something else that he'd meant, but she didn't know what. The more she contemplated

it, the more she wanted to understand. She was more intrigued with him as each and every day

passed.

Even so, she kept her distance from him.

Days and nights passed, and she rarely spoke to him. When she did, he was pleasant and

complimentary. Once or twice, she could have sworn he was flirting with her.

And then one night, Luigio was not tending the bar. It was his night off. She had never taken

advantage of his absence to ply the other bartender for more ale, but this night was different. At first, she truly lost track of it all. She had a cup or two more without realizing it, and then she was very drunk.

At that point, she no longer had any reasonable sense of restraint, and she went back again and

again to the bartender.

Then she allowed herself to be dragged along with two of the dancers out of the tavern after it

closed and down the streets of the Barrens to another tavern, the Soggy Branch, which stayed open

even later, and the three of them laughed and cavorted and danced on the tables, kicking up their legs as men tried to look up their skirts and cheered.

When the others deposited her back at the tavern, it was quite late. Chevolere had seen to it that

she had a key, so she used it to let herself in, and she painfully made her way up the narrow steps to the top floor.

Once there, she was seized with the idea to look in on Chevolere, and she was far too drunk to

think better of it. Whatever impulse gripped her at that point, she followed. She stumbled to his room.

The door was not completely closed. It sat open an inch, and she pushed on it.

The door creaked a bit when it opened. Everything in this place seemed to creak.

Immediately, she found herself pressed face first into the door, the tip of a sword at the back of her neck.

“Ziafiata?” said Chevolere’s voice behind her. “What are you doing? I could have killed you.”

She turned around, giggling. “I wanted to see you, so I—” The words died in her throat.

Chevolere caught her by the shoulder and jerked her body back to face the wall. He wasn’t

wearing his mask. She supposed he didn't wear it to sleep.

The sight of him sobered her somewhat. She gaped at the wall, trying to process what it was she'd

just seen. It was nothing like what she'd expected.

His face was entirely unmarred. He had smooth, perfect skin. There were no scars. His nose was

straight and perfect and he was… beautiful.

"Go back to bed," he growled.

She turned back around, reaching out for him. Her fingers brushed his cheekbone.

He caught her hand, nostrils flaring. "Don't *touch* me."

"Why do you wear it?" she said.

He let go of her, stalking out of the outer room and through the door to his bedchamber. When he

reappeared, he was tying the mask over his face. Now, she registered that his chest was bare, and he was only clad in a pair of loose trousers. He looked vaguely ridiculous that way—masked and half

dressed. He crossed back to her. "I'll escort you to your room, then?"

"Everyone says you were mauled by a bear or in an awful fire or something, but there's nothing

wrong with you. You're very handsome, in fact. Why would you cover your face like that?"

He took her by the arm and tugged.

She looked at his chest, taking that in. He had a smattering of dark hair over the top, and more hair accentuating the lines of his pectoral muscles. He was beautiful there as well, and she followed her impulse to reach out and touch him, even as he pulled her towards the door of the room. She ran

splayed fingers over hard, warm muscle.

He made a horrible gurgling noise and let go of her. He took two steps back, holding up both of his arms to ward her off.

She bit down on her bottom lip, eyes wide.

He straightened, lowering his arms. He drew in a steadying breath. “Please,” he said. “I can’t bear that.”

“Bear what?” she murmured.

“Your hands on me like that. Never do that again.”

“I’m sorry.”

It was quiet.

He sniffed. “I can smell the liquor on you.”

“I might have had a bit too much.” She cringed. “But you must tell me why. What is the purpose of

the mask? Is nothing they say about you true? You don’t actually have violent sexual appetites? You were never scarred? What else have you concocted about yourself?”

“Go back to bed,” he said. “Or to bed in the first place, rather, since I’m realizing you haven’t

been there yet.”

“You won’t tell me anything,” she said, looking him over. “Do you wear the mask so that you won’t

be recognized? That would make sense. And it would be easy enough to tell people it was because

you were scarred. That would keep them from asking you too many questions about it, I suppose."

"Ziafiata—"

"Who is it you don't want to recognize you?"

He lurched toward her, and then thought better of it. "I suppose if I'm going to take you back to

your room, I'll have to dress first, won't I? You're very drunk, and you'll probably try to touch me again, although I don't understand why you would. Haven't I been horrible to you?"

"Everyone has been horrible to me," she said. "You've at least been honest."

"I've lied to you about everything."

"Well…" She considered. "Yes. But you've been honest that you were going to be dishonest, so I

suppose that counts for something."

He let out an exasperated sound and went off through the door into his bedchamber.

She followed him. "It's my father, isn't it? This is all about him. Having revenge on him? He

would recognize you, and that's why you wear the mask."

"Not just him," said Chevolere, opening his wardrobe. "Well, I suppose the rest of them are dead

now. Your father's the only one left."

“How does he know you?” she said. “What did he do? Is that why you don’t like to be touched?”

Chevolere shrugged into a shirt. He began buttoning it, but he didn’t tuck it in. “You should attempt to drink something before bed if you don’t want to be miserable in the morning. There’s water in the kitchen that was boiled earlier and should still be safe enough to drink. I’ll fetch some for you.”

“I can do that myself,” she said. “You needn’t trouble yourself.”

“You, Ziafiata, are nothing but trouble to me.”

She laughed. “Oh, truly? From the way I catch you staring at me sometimes, I could swear you

don’t mind.”

“Is that so?” He folded his arms over his chest, surveying her. “I catch you staring back more often than not. And here you are in my room in the middle of the night. What are you doing here? What do

you want from me?”

“I don’t know.” She glared at him. “I didn’t think it through. I wanted to see you, so I came in here.

Obviously, I’m not welcome, however.”

“No,” he said. “You aren’t. I don’t know how to make that more plain. What other horrors must I

visit upon you before you will come to your senses and despise me?”

“Who says I *don’t* despise you?”

“Do you?” His eyes flashed.

“I loathe you,” she decided.

“Good.”

“Oh, that pleases you?” She clenched her hands into fists.

“Infinitely,” he growled.

She left his room and slammed the door in her wake.

CHAPTER TEN

Chevolere woke Ziafiata the next morning, too early, and she groaned and pulled the covers over

her head and burrowed into her bed.

He stood over her, arms folded over his chest. “If you’d like a tiny dram of iubilia to help with the pain in your head, speak to Lacci and tell him I’ve authorized it. But you oughtn’t do it too often. That way lies dependency, do you understand?”

She pulled the covers away from her face. “This is why you’ve awakened me?”

“I need to know that you won’t say anything.”

“About?”

“My face, obviously.”

She pulled the covers back up over her face. “This is why you’ve awakened me.” Her voice was

flat.

“I’ve gone to great lengths to establish that I’m badly scarred, and if you tell anyone otherwise—”

“I won’t.” She was still under the covers. “Now, get out of my room.”

“Thank you,” he said. He gazed down at her form under the blankets. He found himself wishing

she’d show her face to him again. “Listen, I’m sorry if I was harsh with you last night. When I’m

awakened in the night, I can be… unpleasant.”

“You’re always unpleasant, Chevolere.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” He sighed.

“I want to go back to sleep,” she said.

“You’d like me to leave.”

“Yes.”

He hesitated. And then he walked out without another word. He shouldn’t have apologized. It was

better if she loathed him, after all.

It was only that he found himself wishing she wouldn’t.

At any rate, he didn’t have the luxury of contemplating Ziafiata that day. He had other business to contend with. He left the tavern in the cold light of morning and went down to the docks on the south side of the city, where he watched the boats come in.

When he finally spied Matteo and Pietro, he let out a breath of relief. He had been growing

worried that they weren’t going to be coming after all.

But there they were, and a haggard, bearded man staggered out of the boat with them.

Chevolere offered the man a hand to help him out. “Geolli Varti, I presume? I’m quite pleased to

meet you.”

Geolli looked Chevolere over. “Well, the Beast of the Barrens. They said it was you who had

sprung me, but I didn’t quite believe it. I was hoping…”

“That finally, after all these years, your cousin Federo would show that he still cared about you?

Not a chance.”

Geolli’s chin wavered a bit. “No, I suppose that was a foolish thing to think.”

“Come with me,” said Chevolere. “It’s only a short walk back to my tavern. You can get cleaned

up and have a meal. Rest, if you need it.”

“And then I suppose you’ll explain why it is you’ve freed me from the Caputio fortress?” said

Geolli. “You didn’t do it out of the kindness of your heart.”

“No,” Chevolere agreed. “But I hope our intentions will be aligned in this. There’s no need to

speak of it yet, however.”

“You wish for me to feel further in your debt before you ask anything of me?”

“You are already in my debt,” said Chevolere. “I could offer to return you to the Caputio fortress, but that’s rather an inconvenience for my men. If

you’re determined not to assist me, you’re of no use to me. It would be easier to tell one of them to put a bullet in your skull.”

Geolli glanced at the musqueteers who had freed from and escorted him across the water. He

looked back at Chevolere and raised his eyebrows. “Well, when you put it that way, I don’t see that I have much choice.”

Chevolere squared his shoulders. This wasn’t how he had intended for this to work. “I don’t mean

to threaten you. Truly. Will you come with me willingly?”

Geolli gave him a curt nod.

They set out together.

Once back in the tavern, he had a bath drawn for Geolli and left the man to soak.

Ziafiata was asleep again. He looked in on her and she was curled up in her bed, her hair spilling

out over her pillow.

He stood in the doorway and gazed at her and wondered if he needed to hide this from her. She

hated her father, it was true, but blood was thick. He also wasn’t sure how close she would have been to Geolli, who was her cousin as well.

It would be next to impossible to hide it completely, so he wouldn’t attempt to do so. And if it

came down to it, he could restrain Ziafiata. He’d promised not to, of course, but it would only be for a short time.

He shut the door on her.

Geolli was dressed and shaved and clean within an hour and Chevolere received him in the outer

rooms of his chambers. It was still early, before noon, so Chevolere did not offer Geolli anything

alcoholic. Instead, he served him coffee and buttered bread from the kitchen below.

Geolli ate and drank eagerly, barely looking at Chevolere as he crammed three pieces of buttered

bread into his mouth, one after the other.

“Your cousin Federo left you to rot in the Caputio fortress,” said Chevolere, sipping his coffee.

“It’s been six years. I don’t know if you are aware of the passing of time.”

Geolli looked up, chewing. He swallowed and wiped crumbs from his face. “Six? Indeed?”

“He had no intention of ever freeing you. And it was on his orders that you were doing the job that got you captured, is that not true?”

“It is,” said Geolli.

“Did you ever think about Federo during your imprisonment?”

Geolli drank some coffee. “I did.”

“What were your thoughts?”

“They weren’t complementary.”

“Did you ever think of taking revenge on him for what he put you through?”

Geolli regarded him. “Perhaps.”

“Listen, you were close to him. He trusted you. If anyone could get close enough to cut his throat, it’s you. I’ll pay you, of course.” Chevolere set his cup of coffee on the table.

“You want me to kill him?”

“Yes,” said Chevolere. “And before he dies, tell him something. It’s important that you do. Tell

him that the world will go on without him, just as it went on without Allicionne. Can you remember

that?”

“How much will you pay?”

Chevolere picked the coffee cup back up. He looked into the dark liquid, which he always took

black. He named a price.

A sharp intake of breath from Geolli.

“I thought it would be sufficient if you wished to relocate elsewhere, away from Rzymn.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s quite acceptable.”

“You’ll do it, then?”

“Yes,” said Geolli.

Chevolere drew in a breath. He waited to feel something, relief or vindication or even anxiety

about the deed that was to be done. But there was nothing. Perhaps he should have known that. There was nothing when he dispatched the first of the men, after all. None of them had made him feel a thing, and yet he was driven to find them all, to destroy them all.

Once Federo was gone, it would be done.

But it would never be over, because he had been turned into this, into what he was now. He had

been changed by it all, and it lived on in his metamorphosis.

“When?” said Geolli.

“Whenever you are ready,” said Chevolere. “But I don’t think you should delay too long, because

news of your escape will have already spread. He will wonder if you do not come to him quickly, I

should think.”

“True,” said Geolli. “Tonight, then.”

* * *

Ziafiata spent the day in a fog from her hangover. She resolved she would never drink so much ale

again, and she spent much of the day in bed. She might not have even known there was anyone else

staying in the upper rooms of the tavern if she had not called for a bath later in the afternoon and heard the servants complaining about hauling water up the steps *again*.

Curious, once she was bathed and dressed, she went seeking the other recipient of the bath.

When she found him in his room, he was astonished to see her there. “Can it be little Zia?” he said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Uncle Geolli!” she exclaimed. He was not her uncle, of course, but there had been a time when he

was her father’s constant companion, and he was always in and out of her house. Geolli and her father would carouse together quite often. Geolli had been quite close to her father before he’d been locked up in the Caputio fortress. Oh! This was why Chevolere had wanted the key, then. To get Geolli out.

But… why would he wish that?

“He has brought you here to torture Federo, I suppose,” said Geolli. “Has he hurt you?”

“What does he want with you?” said Ziafiata.

Geolli sighed. “Ah, my dear, I am sorry. But I have no future here else. I cannot refuse to do as he asks.”

“What does he ask?” she said.

“If you wish to be free of the beast, tell me,” said Geolli. “I will find a way.”

“No, I am quite free,” she said. “He lets me come and go as I please. It’s only that it doesn’t make sense. I know he wishes to hurt Father, and I don’t see how you would fit in.”

“Of course you don’t,” he said, giving her a sad smile. “You would only see good in me. You are a

sweet girl.”

She was not a sweet girl. Not anymore.

But Geolli was not interested in telling her anything, and when she went to seek Chevolere, she

could not find him. She searched the entire tavern, but he was nowhere to be found.

Finally, late in the afternoon, he appeared with two of his musqueteers, and then he locked himself in his room above the tavern.

She went and knocked on his door, and he didn't answer. She called for him, and still he ignored

her.

But at dusk, he left his room and went to Geolli, who let him in. The men had a long conversation.

She tried to listen at the door, but they spoke too softly for her to understand it.

Then when they opened the door, she was discovered.

"Zia!" said Geolli. He turned to Chevolere. "Now, see here. Whatever it is you are doing to this

young girl, I want you to know—"

"I am doing nothing," said Chevolere flatly. "But I wish Federo to think otherwise. That is all.

Now, you must go. I do not think there is any time to waste."

Geolli hesitated, as if he would say more, but he seemed to think better of it and only shook his

head. He kissed Ziafiata's forehead and whispered an apology to her. Then he went down the stairs.

Chevolere went into his room and to the window to watch Geolli leaving the tavern, his figure

disappearing into the growing shadows. Long after Geolli was gone, Chevolere stood at the window.

“You’ve sent him to kill my father,” she said.

Chevolere turned to her. “Ziafiata, I had forgotten you were there. Listen, I know this is—”

“I don’t care,” she said. “You don’t need to hide it from me. I suppose he is angry because Father

never did anything to free him from the Caputios.”

“Of course you care,” said Chevolere.

“I don’t.” She lifted her chin. “I have known you were planning it all along. You have never hidden it from me. I knew it would happen eventually. It took me a bit to understand the part about Geolli, but now it all makes sense. What I don’t understand is why you hate my father so much.”

“Your father is not a loving man, and he has even been cruel to you,” said Chevolere. “But you do

still care for him.” Abruptly, he crossed the room and seized her wrist. He yanked her through the

doorway and shut the door to his room. Then he put his body against the door.

“What was that for?” She gave him an irritated look, feeling out of sorts now. She smoothed her

skirts.

“I’ve not forgotten the way you went for Diago. You’re likely to go after Geolli and attempt to stop this.”

“Yes,” she said sarcastically. “That’s why I haven’t gone after him at all but stood here and spoken to you.”

“Perhaps you intend to do me some injury,” he said. He narrowed his eyes behind his mask. “Yes,

that’s why you’ve been pretending to be attracted to me against all sense. You thought you could get close to me, but it hasn’t worked.”

“Oh, blazes, Chevolere, it is not that way at all.” She went to the window where he’d been until a

moment ago. Should she wish to stop her father’s demise? Why had the thought never occurred to her?

His voice was quiet. “You really aren’t attempting to stop it, are you?”

“Since I have been separated from him, I haven’t missed him,” she said gruffly.

Nothing from Chevolere.

“I don’t know what has become of me, truly.” She wrapped her arms around her own waist. “I

haven’t felt things, not truly, since I killed Diago.” Oh. She’d said that out loud, so baldly. She let out a trembling breath. Hearing it out loud made it seem even more real.

“Yes, it does tend to be that way,” said Chevolere.

Her gaze flitted back to him.

“The first man I killed, I thought…” Chevolere looked down at his hands. “Well, it was not how I

thought it would be. But after, certain parts of me seemed muted and numbed.”

“Did the feeling ever come back?” she said.

He shook his head. “But then I killed more men, and each time, it got worse. When I first started it, I thought that I would need to kill each of them with my own hands, that I needed to see their eyes grow dead and feel their hot blood spill on my skin. But then it was inconvenient with one of them, and it was easier to let a hired man do it, and the feeling of it… well, the feeling of it was the same whether I did it physically or not. Besides it never felt like anything, anyway.”

“Who were these men you killed? What does it have to do with my father?”

“Who says it does?”

“I know it does.”

“They paid your father for what they did. He was the one who arranged it,” said Chevolere. “He

was the one who profited from it.”

“Profited from what?”

Chevolere shook his head.

“You can’t think that I wouldn’t believe you,” she said. “There is little that I wouldn’t believe

about my father. I know him, and I know what he is involved in. He is a street lord in Rzymn. He is a cruel man.”

“When I came to Rzymn, I was very young,” said Chevolere. “We were both young. Young and

trusting. We were lambs to the slaughter.”

“Who?” she said. “Who besides you?”

“I grew up in Dumonte,” said Chevolere. “I grew up on a farm on the edge of the river there. On

clear nights, we could look up and see the castle high on the hill in the distance, but mostly it was obscured by clouds of red dust. There is a sliver of fertile land near the water in Dumonte.

Everywhere else, it is nothing but red clay.”

“I know this,” she said. “I have never been to Dumonte, but everyone knows who supplies the food

for all the kingdoms.”

He licked his lips. “It wasn’t one of those kinds of farms. It was only a small, family farm, and we often struggled. We had very little livestock. We only grew one thing—wheat. We had a series of bad harvests, and we had to sell all the animals and then we had to sell off bits of the land. Finally, my father grew ill, and he died, and then… then it was just us.”

“Just who?”

“My mother died when I was born,” he said. “I was the youngest.”

“You had older brothers and sisters?”

“A sister,” he said. “One. Allicionne. She was five years older than me, and she was a dreamer.

She had these ideas about becoming a singer. She had a beautiful voice, but she didn’t understand

anything about the reality of being a woman performer in a city like Rzymn. She would have been

better off joining the sisters and singing in the choir. She might still be alive.”

“What happened?”

“With our father gone, she sold off what was left of the farm, which wasn’t much, and she used that money to get us to Rzymn, where she thought she would sing in the operas, but the moment we got off the boat, we were pick-pocketed and we lost almost everything. We were taken in by some kind soul,

who offered us a generous loan. We didn’t know that the man worked for the Abrusse family, or what

these loans were really like. We took the money, and I’m afraid we didn’t spend it well either. We

wasted time living in an inn beyond our means and we bought clothes we couldn’t afford and dined in restaurants that were too expensive. And Allicionne, of course, did not have any luck trying to land a job singing for the opera. There was a man at a tavern who agreed to allow her to sing, but I didn’t like the way he leered at her, and I told her to stay away from him, and so we had no income at all.”

She swallowed. “So, when they came to collect on the debt you could not pay.”

“No.”

“Did they hurt her?” she said. She knew it was common practice. Those who did not pay their

debts might have their noses bloodied if it was a first offense. Later, their kneecaps might be

shattered. Still later, they might lose fingers or toes or whole limbs. It was the way her family did business. Fear kept people in line.

Chevolere drew in a breath and his shoulders rose and fell with the movement. He didn’t say

anything.

“Did they beat her?” she said. “Did they… did they kill her?”

“No,” he said. “Not outright. It was long and agonizing. She suffered. Her spirit died long

before…”

“But who were these men you killed?” she said. “Were they the men of the Abrusse family who

came to collect on the debt? The ones who beat her?”

“They didn’t beat her,” he said. He ran his thumb over his knuckles. “And it wasn’t the debt

collectors. I don’t hold them responsible. Some of them had no other choice than to become

embroiled in all of it. The way it works in this city, there is only the choice to be terrorized or to become terrifying. I chose the latter.” He raised his gaze to hers. “I think you may have too.”

Tears pricked her eyes again. She turned back to the window. “So, then, what did happen to your

sister Allicionne?”

“We sold things at first,” he said. “Our clothing and other things we’d purchased. We moved out of

the expensive inn and Allicionne started singing in the tavern where *all* the men leered at her, and we kept barely on top of it for a while. I went to work, too, washing dishes and clearing tables in the same tavern. But the debt, it kept growing and growing. The interest they were applying to it, it was unreasonable. We began to realize we could never pay it off, no matter what we did. And that was

when a man offered Allicione a way to get out from under it entirely. He worked for the Abrusse

family, and when I heard of it, I—”

The glass of the window shattered, and something whizzed past Ziafiata's face, barely grazing her

skin.

It was a knife, she realized.

It buried itself in the door, inches from Chevolere's head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Down," Chevolere said to her, eyes flashing.

Immediately, she threw herself down on the floor.

Chevolere hit the floor as well.

But no more knives came through. Instead, a figure hurtled through the window, shattering

whatever glass was left with an explosive sound.

She cowered as pieces of glass rained down around her.

When she lifted her head, she saw that Chevolere was on his feet now, and that the figure that had

come through the window was Geolli. Chevolere had his dagger against Geolli's sword. He was

barely blocking each of Geolli's attacks, giving ground as he did so.

In moments, Geolli had Chevolere up against the wall. He swung the sword.

Chevolere blocked the blade with his dagger. "We waited too long. Federo knew something was

going on. He was ready for you."

“Yes,” said Geolli.

“Did he offer you more money?”

Geolli pulled the sword back and thrust again.

Grunting, Chevolere blocked it again. “He sent you to kill me, then?”

“Yes,” said Geolli, sliding his blade against Chevolere’s shorter one.

Ziafiata pushed herself to her feet, pieces of glass falling off her skirts, making tinkling noises as they hit the floor.

Geolli didn’t even turn to look at her. Instead, he pulled back his sword and swung his arm back,

readying a lower thrust this time.

Chevolere had to twist his arm to block it with his dagger. He barely did it. Geolli’s sword went

into his cape, pinning it to the wall.

Ziafiata leaped over the broken glass. She ran for the table and picked up a chair.

Geolli’s sword cut through Chevolere’s cape. He swung his sword back over his head and brought

it down.

Chevolere caught it with his dagger, right in front of his face.

Ziafiata heaved the chair over her head.

Chevolere gritted his teeth, straining to keep the sword back.

The blades screamed against each other—the sound grating to Ziafiata’s ears.

But she didn’t let that stop her. She brought the chair crashing down on Geolli’s head.

Stunned, he whirled, striking out with his sword.

She jumped out of the way and landed on her backside.

Geolli pushed the chair off, and it landed with a splintering crunch on the floor. “Zia, stay out of this.”

Chevolere leaped onto Geolli’s back and brought the dagger to his throat. “Drop your sword.”

Geolli grimaced. For a moment, he gripped his sword tighter, but then he released it and it

clattered down next to what was left of the chair.

Ziafiata scrambled to her feet and scurried over to pick it up. She raised the sword with a steady

hand, pointing the tip at his throat.

“Zia?” said Geolli. “What has this monster done to you? Why do you protect Chevolere?”

“Well,” said Ziafiata, “he was in the middle of a story when you crashed through the window and

interrupted it, and if you kill him, I’ll never know the end of it. He *is* awful, but he’s also enigmatic and interesting, and I have to know his secrets.”

“Here I thought you wanted to see if I could be better in bed than Diago,” said Chevolere, amused.

“Well, you said that would never happen,” said Ziafiata.

“How much did Federo offer you, Geolli?” said Chevolere. “What am I worth to him?”

“He didn’t offer me money,” said Geolli, his face grim. “Zia, surely you have heard of this man’s

unnatural appetites. Surely you can’t be drawn to that.”

“What did my father offer, then?” said Ziafiata, ignoring the rest of what he’d said. It probably

wasn’t wise to banter with Chevolere, but she was feeling more alive than she’d felt since she and

Chevolere had burst out of the inn when she’d killed Diago. It was as if sharp weapons suited her.

“He has captured my son,” said Geolli.

“You don’t have a son,” said Ziafiata. “You were never married.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t have a son,” said Geolli. “Just that he’s not legitimate. He’s eight years old, and I never acknowledged him, never visited him, never did a thing to let anyone know about

him. I never wanted him to be in danger like this. But somehow, the accounts that I set up for him and his mother were discovered. Your father found them. He took the boy. And now, he says that if I don’t kill Chevolere, he’ll kill my son.”

Ziafiata lowered the sword. “We can’t let that happen.”

“Blazes,” growled Chevolere, tightening his grip on Geolli. “You’re useless to me now. Federo

doesn’t trust you. You can’t get close to him.”

“I’m sorry,” said Geolli. “But I can’t allow anything to happen to my son.”

“I’m sorry,” said Chevolere. “I have no choice but to kill you.”

“No!” said Ziafiata, raising the sword again, but this time pointing it at Chevolere.

“Ziafiata, this is a fine time to start showing any kind of softness,” said Chevolere.

“If you kill Geolli, my father will kill his son. An eight-year-old child!” She drew herself up. “He is a vicious man. He would do it. It isn’t a bluff.”

“That’s very sad,” said Chevolere. “Can’t be helped.”

“Where is the boy being held?” said Ziafiata to Geolli.

Chevolere sighed heavily.

“The tower,” said Geolli.

Ziafiata let her sword drop, thinking that through. “All right. I can handle the tower. I’ll get him out.”

“What?” said Chevolere. “You most certainly will not. That’s preposterous. Isn’t the tower

guarded day and night under one of your father’s most vicious men, Rocco?”

“I’m not going to fight my way in,” she said. “Let go of Uncle Geolli.”

“No, I have to kill him. If I let him go, he’ll try to kill me,” said Chevolere.

“Uncle Geolli, you have to promise not to. I’ll bring back your son. What’s his name?”

“Zia,” said Geolli. “This *is* foolish. But if you are insistent of it, I must come with you.”

“No,” she said. “There is no way to disguise you. They are expecting you. They would never let

you in.”

“They will recognize you as well,” said Geolli.

“I don’t think they will,” said Ziafiata. “Not if I cover my head with a scarf and wear the right

clothes. I have exactly the sort of skirts and blouses from Marta. It will work.”

“I can’t let you risk yourself,” said Geolli. “You can’t do this alone.”

“Well,” said Ziafiata, “if Chevolere wanted to come along, I would permit it. I could use his

assistance.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t work at all,” said Geolli. “What of his mask?”

“He doesn’t have to wear it.”

Chevolere barked out a laugh. “I’m going to slit his throat right this instant and end this

discussion.”

“If you do, I will never forgive you,” said Ziafiata.

“You think I care?” said Chevolere.

“Yes.”

“I don’t,” said Chevolere. He made no move to slit Geolli’s throat. “Give me one reason why I

should help you with this.”

“Because you could save another lamb from the slaughter,” she said.

He flinched.

She lifted her chin.

He sighed and he took the dagger away from Geolli’s throat. “Very well. But he will be chained

and locked up while we’re gone. I can’t trust Geolli Varti to run free.”

“Acceptable, as long as he isn’t hurt,” said Ziafiata. She looked him over. “You’ll need different

clothing as well.”

* * *

Chevolere felt naked without the mask. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt outside air on

his face, and the sensation wasn’t pleasant. The mask was more than a piece of leather. It was his

armor. Without it, he was pink and vulnerable.

The musqueteer uniform that he was wearing didn’t fit well either. There was a seam in one of the

arms that had been badly repaired and it chafed against his skin. Right at that precise moment, he was reaching inside to try to adjust the seam, even though he’d been doing that since he put it on to no avail.

“We haven’t a moment to lose,” Ziafiata was saying. She was speaking to a man who was guarding

the door of the tower. Her hair was wrapped up in a threadbare scarf, and she was dressed like any

common girl one might see in the streets of Rzymn. “Geolli Varti is a desperate man, and he may well try to come here. But if he does, and he does not find his son, he will be convinced to do as he’s bade.

Why are you gaping at me like that? Hand over the child.”

Chevolere didn’t know how he’d allowed himself to be roped into this ridiculous enterprise.

There was no reason to take a risk for Geolli Varti. This didn’t further his interests in the least. He had no reason to try to make Ziafiata happy, either. That was also ridiculous.

The man at the door to the tower had a hand on his sword. “Now, see here, lady. No one said

anything to me about sending the kid off with anyone else. Of course his father knows he’s here. But he’d be foolish to mount an attack.”

“I think the idea is that when he tries, you should show him the tower is empty,” said Ziafiata.

“Break his spirit.”

“Why would we bother when he’d simply get himself killed trying to get in?” said the man. The

tower used to be a bell tower in a cathedral. The cathedral itself was gone, having been washed out in a bad storm a generation ago, but the bell tower stood and had been taken over by the street lords.

It had changed hands numerous times, sometimes in the hands of the Caputios and sometimes the

Abrusses. It had only one entrance, at the bottom of the tower, and there were only small, narrow

windows through which no one could climb. The place was said to be impenetrable.

“I don’t know,” said Ziafiata, exasperated. “No one thinks to share strategy with a girl. They

simply snap their fingers and tell me what to do. Give me the child. Now.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t know who you are, and

__”

“I *told* you, I owe the family a debt, and this is how I can repay it. Please. Hand him over.”

“I can’t simply do that on your word,” said the man.

She leaned in closer, her voice dropping as she glanced over her shoulder at Chevolere. “I

overheard them saying that if I fail, this musqueteer can do what he likes with me. He’s here to protect the child, not me. Please. You wouldn’t subject me to that, would you?”

The man eyed Chevolere, who shifted uncomfortably on his feet. Was he to pretend he hadn’t heard

that? Of course he’d heard it. Truly, he wished Ziafiata had given him a better idea of what to do

besides, *Follow my lead,* which was all she’d said.

The man said, “I don’t know. I—”

“Oh!” Her eyes lit up as if she’d just had an idea. “They taught me something. A complicated set of steps with my hands. They said if I had any trouble, I could show you that. That would prove I’m from the family, wouldn’t it? No one else knows it.”

“You know the sign of Abrusse?” said the man. “Fine. Let’s see it.”

She held out her hand, palm up.

The man put his fingers on top of hers.

She enclosed his hand with her thumb and her pinky finger and then slid her other fingertips against his palm. She placed her hand against her heart, and the other man did the same, wary eyes on her.

She crossed her middle and ring fingers and bowed her head and then lifted it. “Come the victor,” she intoned in a low voice.

“Abrusse prevails,” said the man. He shrugged and opened the door. “Fine. Wait here. I’ll have

him for you in a moment.” He left the door open and disappeared up the steps into the darkness of the tower.

“*That’s* the sign of Abrusse?” muttered Chevolere.

“Shh,” she said under her breath.

“I thought it would be more complex.”

“Shut up.” She glanced at him, eyes flashing.

He couldn’t wait for this to be over. Once it was, he would go back and give Geolli his son, and

then be right back where he started, with no way to get close to Federo and no way to carry out his revenge. Everything was ruined.

Moments passed.

Overhead, a night bird crossed in front of the moon, cawing out a mournful cry.

In the distance, the sounds of the city at night were a muffled roar of music and laughter.

A different man appeared at the doorway, dragging a boy along with him. He looked Ziafiata over

and furrowed his brow. “You. You look familiar to me. Who are you?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ziafiata’s heart was beating so fast that she was sure the man could hear it, but she forced herself to appear outwardly calm. “I’ve never seen you before in my life, sir. Now, there is very little time.”

She reached for the boy. “If I do not deliver the child, the consequences I face are severe. Give him to me.”

The man furrowed his brow. “You look like Federo’s daughter herself—Ziafiata Abrusse.”

“Oh!” said Ziafiata, forcing herself to laugh easily. “People say that to me *all* the time. I’ve never seen her up close. Are we really alike?” She preened, lifting her chin and turning her face this way and that.

The man scrutinized her. “Well… there is a resemblance, yes, but your chin is not quite like hers, I don’t think.”

Ziafiata touched her chin, laughing again. “I think it is a compliment, just the same?”

“Yes, certainly,” said the man gruffly. “You are both quite pretty.” He pushed the boy through the

doorway. “I guess you’d best be off, then?”

“I must indeed.” Ziafiata took the boy’s hand, but he wrenched it away from her, looking up at her

with a defiant look in his eye. She tried to give him a look with her eyes that communicated all was well, but the boy was having none of it.

“Boy,” said Chevolere in a gruff voice, hand on his pistol. “Take her hand.”

The boy looked up at Chevolere. “I don’t have to do anything you—”

Chevolere suddenly swept the boy up off his feet and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of

grain. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Of course.” Ziafiata started after him, casting one glance over her shoulder at the tower and then quickly turning back to Chevolere.

They walked to the end of the block and turned a corner.

“Put him down,” she said to Chevolere.

Chevolere did, and the boy shrank from them.

“It’s all right,” said Ziafiata. “We’re taking you someplace safe.”

* * *

It was nearly dawn by the time it was all settled.

Ziafiata and Chevolere watched the sun rise over the water as they stood on the docks. A boat

containing Geolli, his son, and the boy’s mother had just sailed off into the horizon. Chevolere hadn’t been pleased about arranging for the boat or about giving Geolli money to help him get away, but he’d done it when she pressed.

She was less surprised about this than she should have been, she supposed, but somehow, she’d

known that she had an influence on Chevolere, that she’d tamed her beast, and that he would do her

bidding. She found it gratifying, and she could see that Chevolere found it alarming.

This early the docks were mostly empty. There were a few fisherman setting off in the early

morning light, but Rzymn was not a city that thrived on a wholesome commerce such as fishing. There were two types of people in Rzymn—those connected to the Order of the Flamme and those who

were connected to Rzymn's criminal enterprises. Very little existed otherwise.

So, there was no one around to hear when she turned to him and said, "What did Allicionne do to

get her out from under the debt? What was it that killed her?"

Chevolere sighed. "I'm sorry I ever started explaining any of that to you."

She shrugged. "If you hadn't, I would have let Geolli kill you."

He scoffed. "Oh, is that so? I think not. You enjoy making use of me too much. Use of my

resources, use of my money, use of me in a musqueteer uniform."

"I like the way you look without your mask," she said, raising her eyebrows lightly. This was the

truth. She'd been rather mesmerized by his face. If she hadn't been so nervous trying to get that boy free, she wouldn't have been able to take her eyes off him. Now, even though his mask was firmly in place, she could see his features beneath it, and it made him look different, somehow.

"Of course you do." He glowered at her.

"I don't think you're nearly as bad of a man as you pretend to be," she said.

“You’re wrong about that,” he said, turning to look at the sun struggling into the sky. The water

reflected back purples and oranges and reds.

“Tell me,” she said. “About Allicionne.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I shall guess, then,” she said. “It was prostitution. She sold her body, and there was nothing left of her, and that is why you said what you said to me.”

He turned to look at her. “It was worse than that.”

She waited.

He turned back to the water. “There were men, some of them carales, rich men, and they were

willing to pay a great deal of money for a virgin. Your father set it all up, and he took their money. He was there, but then I was too. I watched it.”

“Your sister wished you to—”

“No, of course not. She tried to keep it from me, and I followed her, to spy on her, and I saw it

happen. They were savage with her. They were insatiable. And when it was over, she was bleeding

and bruised and mangled.” His voice had gone dull. “It took her weeks to recover the physical

wounds, but internally, she never recovered.”

“I thought… This wasn’t what killed her?”

“She was with child,” said Chevolere. “She didn’t want to be, and she made me go and buy her

something, some tea that she could brew to expel it from her womb. But after she drank it, she started bleeding, and she never stopped, and I went seeking help, but nothing could be done, and she bled and bled and bled until she was gone.”

Ziafiata didn’t say anything. She gazed at the sun rising over Chevolere’s shoulder. His back was

to her. All the teasing lightness from before was gone now. She felt sorry she’d pressed him and made him speak of it all. She felt ashamed of herself.

The silence between them stretched on and on.

Finally, she spoke, her voice barely audible. “How old were you?”

“Twelve,” he said. He didn’t turn around. “I went to your father in my grief. I suppose they did not stop me because I was so young and they did not consider me a threat. I stormed into one his taverns while he was playing cards with his men and I tried to stab him. I didn’t get very far, of course. He disarmed me and plucked me off of him and threw me on the ground while I sobbed and screamed at

him about what he’d done to my sister. He just laughed and gestured around and said, ‘Is not the

world going on without her?’ As if that somehow was supposed to prove something. He kicked me in

the stomach a few times and had two of the men throw me out, but he said it wasn’t worth his time to kill me. I don’t suppose he’d remember it, or recognize me, but I didn’t want him to know who I was either, so that is why I decided to wear the mask.”

She nodded. But that didn’t matter, because he couldn’t see her. So, she simply waited.

He didn’t say anything else.

“The other men you killed are the ones who hurt your sister, I suppose?” she said. “My father is the only one left. You saved him for last.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t touch women because of what you saw,” she said.

“The entire idea of it *disgusts* me,” he said. “And when I had to attempt to… when I threatened you…” His voice shook, and he stopped speaking.

She clasped her hands together. She wanted to offer some kind of sympathy, some kind of comfort,

but every word she thought of sounded inadequate. So, she said nothing.

“And I did it for *nothing*,” he said, his voice bitter. “All of that scheming, and your father lives, and I have no way to get close to him.”

“What if I helped you?”

He turned on her. “What are you saying?”

“We could trick my father. Make it look as if I managed to make you fall for me instead of your

terrorizing me, and that you now do my bidding. I could say that I convinced you to let me go. And

then, once he welcomed me home, I would help you get inside. You could stand over him while he

cowered in his bed. I know you said it doesn’t matter, but I imagine you’d rather confront him,

wouldn’t you? You’d rather do it face to face?”

“Why?”

“You know I hate him,” she said. “You threw that in my face when you first spoke to me.”

He shook his head. “He’s your father. No matter how much you hate him, you don’t want to be

involved in plotting to kill him.”

“I might want something else in return,” she said.

“Oh?” he said.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about what I might trade with you if you changed your mind about wanting

to…” She didn’t say the words “bed me.” It was better not to. She cleared her throat. “I mean that

I’ve been thinking about what I might want if we struck a bargain between ourselves.”

“What do you want?”

“I want the Abrusse family,” she said. “I want to be a street queen.”

His lips parted.

“It’s not unheard of,” she said quickly. “Maria Caputio ruled the family for ten years in the stead of her husband, and she was purportedly the most ruthless and bloodthirsty head of that family ever. And I think I could do it. I think… I can’t think of what else I’d do with myself.”

“How would I help with that?”

“You’d offer us deals on cainlach and iubilia,” she said. “And you’d help me get in to speak to my

father’s caporegimes. If I don’t have their support, I won’t be able to hold the position as queen.”

“They won’t follow you if they think you betrayed your own father.”

“They will. Ruthlessness trumps loyalty,” she said. “You have the connections to set up the

meetings. And I’d need your money to buy things—suitable clothing, for instance. Perhaps wine and

food if I wanted to invite them for a meal. I’d need your help to do it.”

He shook his head.

“Once we had killed my father, you and I would have an alliance. I could provide protection to you

and your assets,” she said.

“Did you ever consider a thing like this before I took you captive?”

“Well, no, but I was frightened all the time back then. All I thought about was escaping my father

and finding Diago, and then—”

“Then I made you kill him, and now you’re unfeeling and cruel and you want to be the head of a

crime family.”

“You didn’t make me do anything.”

“Didn’t I? You said it yourself. I manipulated the situation so that Diago would take advantage of

you and break your heart. And before that, what I did to you, the way I frightened you—”

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “I feel strong now, Chevolere. And… I don’t know, there is

something flattering about your interest, and—”

“Stop.” His nostrils flared.

“I’m not cruel,” she said. “I’m the one who insisted we rescue the little boy, aren’t I?”

He walked past her on the docks.

“Chevolere, where are you going?”

“I have to think about it,” he threw over his shoulder. Then he turned away from her and picked up

the pace. His cape flared out behind him as he moved off the docks.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marta stretched, running a rag over one of the tables in the tavern. “You’re going to get crumbs

everywhere, aren’t you?”

“I’ll wipe them up,” said Ziafiata, who was eating bread fresh from the ovens. It was a bit

crumbly. Steam was rising from it, and the butter she’d put on it was melting in the most wonderful of ways.

“See that you do,” said Marta. “I don’t have time to follow you around and clean up all your

messes.”

“I’m sorry, Marta,” said Ziafiata.

Marta sighed. “No, I’m sorry. I’m not in a good mood this morning, I have to admit. My roommate

kept me up all last night talking about the King of Dumonte, and I wanted to tell her to shut up and let me get some rest, but I didn’t dare.”

“Why not?” said Ziafiata. “It seems to me it’s only fair to ask someone to be more polite.”

“Well, I stay at the boarding house on Tertio Street, and my roommate and I lucked into a deal two

years back. If either of us were to break the lease agreement, it would be null and void, so we have to stay there, together, and sometimes it’s torture. I like her well enough, I suppose, but she talks a lot.”

“Was it a very good deal?” said Ziafiata. “Couldn’t you afford to find a different roommate, or to

strike out on your own?”

“I couldn’t,” said Marta. “But she could. So, as long as she’s happy with me, she stays, and I have to make sure she stays happy.” She sighed. “Anyway, anything you ever wanted to know about the

King of Dumonte, I now know, so ask me anything.”

“Why was she talking about the King of Dumonte?”

“Didn’t you hear? He’s in Rzymn.”

“I didn’t,” said Ziafiata. She mused on this, chewing on her bread. When she swallowed, she said,

“He’s the one who’s the firestarter, isn’t he?”

“Used to be,” said Marta. “Apparently, he no longer has any magic.”

“How does that work?” said Ziafiata.

“I don’t know,” said Marta. “It’s what they say. He was dead set on attacking every other country,

wasn’t he? That war with Fonte was going to go on for decades, they said, and suddenly, he retreated, and then… nothing. They say it’s because he lost the ability to start fires, and therefore couldn’t fight anyone anymore.”

Ziafiata crammed the last of her bread in her mouth.

“That’s not what my roommate wanted to talk about, of course,” said Marta. “She wanted to talk

about the fact that the Queen of Islaigne is with him.”

“Well, she’s his wife, isn’t she?” said Ziafiata, swallowing her last bite of bread.

“No,” said Marta. “Their marriage was dissolved, and then the king married—”

“Oh, yes, I remember this now,” said Ziafiata. “He has a new queen, and she’s already provided

him with an heir. How old is that boy now? Eight? Ten?”

“Something like that,” said Marta. “I don’t know. My roommate, however, is convinced that the

Princess of Islaigne is the daughter of the King of Dumonte as well.”

Ziafiata snorted. “The children are both about the same age. He was busy.” She furrowed her

brow. “If the two of them had a child together, why did they dissolve the marriage, and on what

grounds, because a marriage that produces children—”

“In Islaigne, the rules are different, I understand,” said Marta. “And that’s what my roommate

wants to speculate, because she finds it all so very interesting that they’re traveling around Rzymn together, their daughter in tow, acting as if they’re married, staying in the same suites together, in fact, and flaunting this with no regard for the Queen of Dumonte, who must be horrified at the

embarrassment of his public infidelity.”

“Yes, it does seem rather awful for her.”

“But,” said Marta, “apparently, the king is rarely even in Dumonte, spending all his time on

expeditions north in Islaigne, along with the queen, and his kingdom is essentially run by some

advisor, a former pirate, of all things.”

Ziafiata furrowed her brow. “This is all rather a lot to take in. No wonder your roommate didn’t

want to sleep.”

“You find it interesting, then? Because I think it’s frightfully dull.”

Ziafiata chuckled. “Yes, that’s why you’ve memorized every aspect of it.”

“Oh, no, there’s far more she chattered about. She spent hours detailing all of the places they’ve

been sighted together and talking about people who’ve sketched out the little princess’s face to try to determine who her father is. Also, I think she’s rather got some kind of crush on the king, who’s

supposedly good looking. I’ve never seen him myself.”

“I have,” said Ziafiata. “A long time ago, from far off. He was quite young then, still a boy. Gangly.

He didn’t look good to me then.”

The front door to the tavern opened and Chevolere came in.

Both she and Marta looked up.

He came directly for her table and plopped down in a chair opposite her. “Why do you want it?”

he said.

“Marta and I were talking,” said Ziafiata pointedly.

“Well, you’ll have to finish that later.” Chevolere glanced up at her. “Bring me some coffee,

Marta.” He turned to Ziafiata. “You? Coffee?”

“I’ve had some, thanks,” said Ziafiata. “I don’t think you should order Marta around like that.”

“I’m her employer,” said Chevolere. “I think that’s exactly what I should do.”

“I’ll be right back,” said Marta. She took her wet rag and hurried off in search of coffee.

Chevolere turned his light, light eyes back on Ziafiata. “Have you ever even considered what it

would be like to run the entire Abrusse family? It’s not easy work. It’s brutal.”

“I think I can bear it,” she said. “There’s much I can endure.”

He was quiet, and then he looked down at the table. “True,” he said quietly. “You are quite strong

and stubborn.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve thought about it,” she said. “There has been talk of either of my two elder sisters’ husbands taking over in the event of my father’s death. But he is not pleased with either of them. My sisters both married in haste, eager to get out from under my father’s roof, and they did not pick their husbands with great care. If they had, perhaps they might have considered men who my father would have picked as successors.”

“And you? You couldn’t have considered Diago Caputio a viable successor, and you seemed rather

preoccupied with him.”

She stiffened.

“Sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t say his name?” His voice was soft, apologetic.

“No, I don’t care.” Her voice was emotionless, because she *didn’t* care. Even so, thinking of Diago made her think of his demise, and thinking of that…

“Did you think of some other man as a husband, then?”

“No,” she said. “As you say, I was preoccupied with Diago, but I didn’t think I could ever really

marry him. And if I did, I would be subsumed into the Caputio family. I would no longer *be* an Abrusse.”

“Or you both would have been disowned, and you would have had no family.”

“Yes, I suppose that is the most likely of scenarios,” she said.

“My apologies. Why are we talking about this? It’s my fault, isn’t it? I promise never to bring him up again.”

“You needn’t apologize. It’s relevant,” she said. “I thought about taking over myself, all on my

own, because I thought that I would always pine for Diago and that I would never be able to bear

marrying another man. I was certain Diago was the only man I would ever love.” She shrugged. “I

suppose that’s going to be true anyway. I can’t imagine being so stupid as to fall in love again. This way, I will be married to the family. It will be my husband.”

He eyed her for several moments, saying nothing, and then he looked down at the table.

“You don’t approve?”

“Where the blazes is Marta with my coffee?” he muttered. He got up from the table. “I’m going to

go and look for her.”

But just then, Marta appeared with a steaming cup.

“Oh,” he said. “Excellent. Thank you.” He took it from her and sat back down at the table. “And

tell Jeoff that he must get someone to repair the window in my chambers.”

“Yes, of course,” said Marta, hurrying off.

Chevolere turned back to Ziafiata. He eyed her for several more moments. “I’m not sure about your

plan.”

“Listen,” she said, “why don’t you mind your own business when it comes to my goals, hmm? If

you help me with this, I’ll be out of your hair. I’ll no longer be your responsibility. And you’ll have an ally in the Abrusse family. It’s a very good deal for you. And that’s without even considering that there’s no other way you’re going to be able to take revenge on my father.”

He sipped his coffee and then set it down. “Perhaps I don’t like the idea of pretending to have

fallen for you. That doesn’t really fit with the reputation I’ve built for myself.”

She gave him a sour look. “Well, how else could I convince my father—”

“What if we simply made him believe that you were too strong to be terrorized? That I did my

worst to you and that you were unaffected? It’s the truth, anyway. And that way, I wouldn’t have to pretend to…”

“To be attracted to me?” She glared at him.

“I *am* attracted to you. I don’t care about that. But people would expect me to be demonstrative in public, and that might involve touching, and I’d really… I *couldn’t*.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You act as though you can’t bear skin-on-skin contact, but you’ve touched me on numerous occasions.”

“Not… tenderly,” he said.

“So, it’s like that.” She blinked at him.

He became very interested in his coffee.

“That’s…” She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Why would seeing those men hurt your sister

mean that you could only hurt others with your touch? Wouldn't you—"

"I didn't say it made sense," he cut her off curtly. "And I'll thank you never to speak of that,

especially not where people might be able to hear."

There was no one nearby, and anyone working in the tavern was quite intent on their tasks. She

was sure no one had overheard. "My apologies," she said anyway. "I won't speak of it, then."

"Good," he said. "Anyway, can you agree to that? If so, we have a bargain."

"Fine," she said. "So, ours is a relationship of businesslike respect. It's better, I think. I don't know why I ever thought to say that it was romantic. Preposterous, really, for both of us."

"Just so," he said.

"Can you shake hands?" she said. "Or is that too tender of a touch?"

He thrust his hand out across the table. "Don't mock me, Ziafiata."

"I'll do as I please." She slid her hand into his.

He sucked in an audible breath and jerked his hand, as if he might pull it away. But he seemed to

force himself to tighten his grip, and then he was squeezing her fingers to the point of pain.

She gritted her teeth and squeezed back.

They glared at each other as they shook.

He yanked his hand back and picked up his coffee. He held it between them like a shield. “Then it

is decided. I anticipate a pleasant business relationship.”

“Indeed,” she said. “Mutually beneficial.”

* * *

Chevolere had not accompanied her on her excursion to look for fabric for new clothes, and he had

made himself scarce when she was sewing garments with the help of Marta and some of the other

women. This wasn’t because he did not care for clothing or thought it all beneath him. On the

contrary, Ziafiata was right to think that she must dress the part of a street queen if she wished to secure the loyalty of the caporegimes of the Abrusse family.

No, he’d kept out of it because he had been frightened that it would involve seeing her in states of undress, which could never happen again. Even if it didn’t, it would likely require his looking at her and making pronouncements on his opinions of what she’d chosen, and he didn’t like to look at her.

Looking at her was unsettling.

Looking at her would have rendered him useless, anyway. It didn’t matter what she was wearing.

He thought she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She dazzled him.

He was vaguely aware that this hadn’t been the case when he’d first seen her, and he wasn’t sure

what had made it change. He tried to convince himself it was because he'd been within inches of her naked skin, but he knew it wasn't that.

Maybe that was part of it, but other things were part of it, too. She was dazzling because she was

strong and stubborn, because she was ruthless and ambitious. She was dazzling because she would

not surrender no matter what he did to her. She was dazzling because she had struck out against

Diago. She was dazzling because she wanted her father's position.

Why all this should change the way she looked to him, he didn't know, but it was the way of things.

She had grown more beautiful to him, and now she took his breath away.

Which was what made standing next to her here, in the lower rooms of Caporegime Donato's

tavern, so very distracting. She was gazing around the room, looking at the customers. This tavern

didn't have entertainment on a stage, not like his did. Instead, it specialized almost entirely in

gambling—with tables devoted to cards and dice. She was focused on her task here, but Chevolere

could only focus on her.

She was wearing a dress with metal accents at the shoulders. The bodice was structured, cut high

so as only to give a tantalizing hint of her cleavage. She looked strong and fierce, almost as if she were wearing armor for battle. But there was softness there too, an enticing glimpse of her femininity.

“…in the corner,” Ziafiata was saying.

“What?” said Chevolere.

“Aren’t you paying attention?” said Ziafiata. “You’re staring right at me.”

“It’s, um, it’s loud in here,” said Chevolere.

“You’re standing next to me,” she said. It wasn’t loud, anyway. His tavern was louder than this,

what with music and dancing always going on.

“My apologies,” said Chevolere.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, anyway, what I said was that I don’t see Donato, but that there is Linguio, who is his right hand. We should speak to him, see if he will arrange a meeting with Donato.”

“Fine,” said Chevolere. “Point him out to me?”

She nodded across the room. “Right there. With the red tunic.”

Chevolere started across the room and she followed him. When he reached the table, he gestured

to two empty chairs. “Are these seats taken?”

Linguio looked up. “Chevolere Vox.”

“Oh, have we met?” said Chevolere. “Or is it just that my reputation precedes me?” He pulled out

a chair for Ziafiata, and then another for himself. They both sat.

“I know no other masked man who prowls the Barrens,” said Linguio. “Why join our table?”

“My companion pointed you out to me,” said Chevolere. “We wish to speak to your caporegime,

Donato.”

Linguio had ignored Ziafiata until this point, but now, he turned to her. His eyebrows rose in

recognition. “Why, if it isn’t little Zia Abrusse.”

“Not so little anymore,” said Ziafiata with a wide smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Linguio looked back and forth between them. “I suppose we did hear a story about your father and

a card game. But I did not expect that Chevolere had procured you in order to dress you up and take you around the town.”

“You have it the wrong way round,” said Chevolere in a low voice. “I am here at her behest. She

proved… rather impenetrable. I’ve never met a person with such resolve. We’ve come to an

arrangement, she and I, and we’d like to speak to Donato. Is there some way that you think you could relay that to him?”

“An arrangement,” said Linguio, drawing his brows together.

“A business arrangement,” said Ziafiata. “One that might have significant advantages for Donato if

he chose to speak to us about it.”

“Speak to *you*, you mean, Chevolere,” said Linguio. “It’s clear what’s happened here. You’ve cowed this poor girl into submission and now you mean to take advantage of her connections for your own benefit.”

“I do not submit to Chevolere,” said Ziafiata coldly.

“Indeed not,” said Chevolere, and he couldn’t keep his admiration out of his voice, which was

probably the wrong thing to do, because when Linguio looked at him, he seemed to understand it all

wrong.

Linguio smirked. “Whatever the case, she’s compromised by her association with you, and Donato

has no interest in meeting with Chevolere’s whore.”

Chevolere ripped his dagger out of its sheath and slammed it into the middle of the table. “Want to rephrase that?”

Ziafiata snatched the dagger up. “That won’t be necessary.” She shot him a look.

His nostrils flared.

Ziafiata toyed with the tip of the knife. “Think what you wish, Linguio. It’s interesting to me that most insults to women are truly commentary on the behavior of men, but think what you will. What’s

more important to know is that Chevolere and I are working together. The details of our arrangement aren’t really pertinent. What is important, however, is that his resources can be brought to bear.

Perhaps Donato needs some enticing to meet with me. We would come to the meeting bearing gifts, of

course.”

“Cainlach,” said Chevolere. “Or iubilia, if that’s his pleasure.”

“You’ll speak to Donato,” said Ziafiata. “If he agrees, he can send word to the Popina.” She got up from the table.

Chevolere followed suit.

She walked away, still holding his dagger.

He couldn’t tear his eyes away from her.

* * *

It was late, after midnight, and Ziafiata had a glass of ale, half-drunk, as she stopped by the corner where Chevolere was leaning against the wall, watching one of the female entertainers on stage, who was belting out a song about some man who had done her wrong.

“Any word?” said Ziafiata.

“How much have you had to drink?” said Chevolere.

“That’s none of your business,” she said. “I suppose you’ve heard nothing, then.”

“It’s barely been four hours since we left Linguio,” said Chevolere. “Give it time. And it *is* my business if you come barging into my room in the middle of the night again.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” she said. “I can’t be so drunk as all that, not in public. It wouldn’t look good. People would talk, and a street queen can’t be seen that way.”

“Indeed not,” he said, taking the glass from her and slugging down the rest of it in one long draught.

She glowered at him. “That wasn’t very polite.”

“I suppose it wasn’t.” He looked over her shoulder at the stage. “They seem to think it anyway.”

“Who seems to think what?”

“They think you’re warming my bed.” He gazed ruefully into the empty glass.

“It doesn’t matter what they think,” she said. “But your trying to defend my honor certainly doesn’t quell the rumors.”

“What? I’m supposed to smile when someone calls you wretched names?”

“I don’t care what you do,” she said. “But I can’t be seen as needing you to fight my battles. I’ll hear much worse if I am running the Abrusse family. You have to let me defend myself.”

He glanced at her and then back to the stage. “Yes, fine. I suppose you don’t need me, anyway.”

“I do need you,” she said. “If I didn’t, we wouldn’t have struck this bargain.”

“To defend yourself, I mean,” he said. “But here I am, bringing up Diago Caputio when I promised

I never would again. So, perhaps let’s forget about all that.” He squinted at something over her

shoulder.

She turned. “What is it?”

“Those musqueteers,” he said. “I think they’re wearing Dumonte uniforms.”

She saw what he was talking about. They’d just come in the door, and their uniforms didn’t have

the same colors at the shoulders and wrists. “I saw a uniform like that on a musqueteer earlier when we were speaking to Linguio.”

“Oh?” Chevolere wasn’t really listening to her.

“He was walking by as we were talking about cainlach,” she said. “In fact…” She pointed. “I think

that was the musqueteer.” The musqueteer she’d seen had a trimmed beard and he had turned to another man, who’d come in behind the musqueteers. The other man was wearing a long, dark cloak,

and he was brushing shoulder length dark hair away from his face as he spoke to the musqueteer. The musqueteer pointed at Chevolere, and the other man’s gaze settled on the masked tavern over. The

dark man strode toward them both, flanked by his musqueteers.

Chevolere stood up straight, pushing past her. “I think he wants to speak to me, whoever that is.”

He went to intercept the man, who was several inches taller than Chevolere.

“Chevolere Vox, I presume,” said the man.

“That’s right,” said Chevolere. “And you are?”

“Remy Toussaint,” said the man.

Chevolere stiffened, and Ziafiata’s eyes widened. That was the name of the King of Dumonte.

Now, she took in the man’s clothing, how fine it was, and how many musqueteers were escorting him,

and she felt a bit agitated. This was a *king* standing in this tavern in the Barrens. What was he doing here? What was he even doing in this part of the city?

Chevolere lifted his chin. “Interesting way to announce yourself. If you’re wanting honorifics or

bowing and scraping—”

“I’m here about cainlach,” said Remy, the King of Dumonte. “You’re the man who provides the

cainlach for this city, aren’t you? In fact, almost all of the cainlach in all the countries comes from you, if I’m not mistaken. You distribute it to a network of sellers who take it far and wide.”

Now, Chevolere bowed, deep and low. The movement was exaggerated enough it could have been

taken for mocking. When he spoke, his voice was similarly so full of deference that might have been too thick. “If Your Majesty is wishing to make a purchase, of course I would be happy to assist you in whatever manner you desire. Shall we sit down to discuss cost?” He gestured to a nearby empty

table.

Remy folded his arms over his chest. “I want all of it. Every bit of cainlach you have.”

Chevolere was surprised by this. “All of it? Pardon me, but I don’t know how I could possibly

have such a large supply delivered—”

“I want it destroyed,” said Remy.

Chevolere blinked several times, processing this.

“And when you get more,” said Remy, “then I’ll buy that too and also destroy it. I’ll buy every bit of cainlach you get for as long as the both of us live.”

Chevolere still didn’t say anything.

Ziafiata was also confused.

Remy turned on his heel and marched over to the table that Chevolere had gestured to. He threw

himself down in a chair and waited expectantly.

Chevolere hesitated and then crossed to the table.

Ziafiata trailed after him, curious.

Chevolere was sitting down, and Ziafiata decided to sit down, too. She waited for Chevolere to

tell her to leave, but he didn't say anything, and the king didn't seem to be paying her any attention.

"So, if you want it destroyed," said Chevolere, "that could incur a higher cost."

"Then I'll destroy it myself," said Remy.

"Then we've still got the issue of delivery," said Chevolere.

"If I have you destroy it, how can I be sure that you're actually getting rid of it and not trying to resell it for double the profit?"

"You could observe the destruction," said Chevolere. "But we should talk about how that might be

done. We could probably douse it in seawater and that would ruin it. If you wanted to be quite sure, I suppose it should be burned, however."

"Yes, let's burn it," said Remy.

"Well, that's going to be costly," said Chevolere. "We'll need something flammable to douse the

cainlach in. I don't think it will burn freely otherwise. You'd need to purchase large quantities of that as well."

“Fine,” said Remy. “If I give you the money for both, can you see to it all? I’ll just arrive to

oversee the burning.”

“That can be arranged,” said Chevolere.

“Why do want to destroy it?” said Ziafiata.

Chevolere shot her an annoyed look. “Ignore her.”

“Your wife shouldn’t think it so strange that I want the cainlach destroyed,” said Remy.

“I’m not his wife.”

“She’s not my wife,” said Chevolere at the same time.

“Your Majesty,” said Ziafiata belatedly, with a small smile.

Remy shrugged. “Apologies. I assumed… well, it’s of no matter. The fact remains that cainlach is

evil, through and through. Its use is only pain. There is no reason for it to exist.”

Cainlach was a substance created to be used in warfare. It had a debilitating affect on anyone who

consumed it, making them dizzy and confused. However, it had the side affect of also producing

sexual arousal, and so it was sometimes used to enhance pleasure, or for other, darker purposes—to

create arousal where there was none, in order to seduce an unwilling subject.

“Truly, how do you sleep at night, knowing that you sell the stuff?” said Remy.

Chevolere chuckled, low in his throat. “You’re the same King Remy who torched battlefields and

burned thousands of men to death?”

One of the musqueteers stepped forward. “The king is not to be—”

Remy held up a hand, stopping the other man’s speech. “Yes, you’ve made your point.”

“Burning to death is such an agonizing way to die,” mused Chevolere. “And in the end, all the

countries have seceded again, and Dumonte rules nothing but its own lands. What was it all for?”

Remy spread his hands. “Destroying all the cainlach in the world wouldn’t make up for such a

thing, I don’t suppose, but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing.”

Chevolere nodded slowly. He opened his mouth to speak, but the door to the tavern opened again,

and a woman came through. She was also escorted by men with pistols, though they weren’t wearing

musqueteer uniforms, which was shocking, considering no one besides musqueteers could even shoot

a pistol. There were two of them. She was swathed in a black cloak as well, and she pulled the hood away from her face to look around the room. When she did, Ziafiata caught a glimpse of her hair,

which was flame-colored.

The Queen of Islaigne, then.

The woman’s gaze fell on Remy and his contingent of musqueteers, and she hurried over toward

them.

Remy got to his feet, intercepting her. “Fleur, please tell me you have not come into the streets of the Barrens on your own. Have you lost your mind?”

“I brought Bisset and Gagnon.” She gestured behind her at the armed men.

“Who’s with Margo?” said Remy.

“She’s surrounded by musqueteers and my own guards as well. I did not leave her alone.” The

queen folded her arms over her chest. “You’re really trying to do this, then? Don’t you know it’s

foolish, Remy?”

Remy took her by the arm, as if to try to steer her away from everyone else, but she shook him off.

“What do you think will happen if you destroy all his cainlach?”

“There will be a cainlach shortage,” he said.

“Yes, which will be filled by someone else,” she said. “Someone else will sell it to another man to distribute it.”

“Then I’ll buy that supply as well,” said Remy, glaring at her.

“Oh?” said the queen. “I suppose you’ll have to hope that another musqueteer happily overhears

another conversation while he’s out gambling and you can make pointed inquiries to discover that

person’s identity as well.”

“I will find out,” said Remy. “I have the resources and the time to root out every source of the

poison—”

“It’s noble of you.” She put her hand on his arm. She moved closer. “And I understand why. Of

course I do.”

He backed away from her, shaking his head.

“Remy, it is not the cainlach itself that is evil but the men and women who use it to hurt others,”

she said. “We must punish them. When people see how badly it goes for anyone who uses it, they will think twice about it.”

“Punish them?” said Remy. “Starting with the Queen of Dumonte?”

“Well, perhaps you could leave the mother of the future king out of it,” said the queen, shaking her head.

“Coralie never gets punished,” muttered Remy.

“Coralie has been punished many times over,” countered the queen.

Remy gestured behind him at Chevolere. “This man has been promised a great deal of money from

me. I can’t back out of the arrangement now.”

“I’m sure this man would rather you leave his cainlach business intact rather than dismantling it,”

said the queen. She peered around at Chevolere. “Isn’t that right, sir?”

Chevolere got to his feet and bowed to the queen. “We are honored by your very presence here, of

course.”

“Oh, don’t,” said the queen. “The last thing we need is attention, here, in the Barrens.” She shook her head at Remy. “Really, you’re not usually so reckless.”

Remy sighed. “If I bought just one shipment—”

“That would be pointless and expensive,” said the queen. She nodded at Chevolere. “Release him

from any obligation to make a purchase from you, if you please?”

“There is no obligation,” said Chevolere.

“There,” said the queen. She looked up at Remy with tenderness in her eyes. “You see?”

“So, I should do nothing?” said Remy. “That is what you are saying?”

“When you said you would take me back to Rzymn, this is not the sort of activity you promised

me,” she said, and her voice had deepened suggestively.

Remy laughed low in his throat. “Yes, we’ll leave. Perhaps it is foolish.”

“I never called you foolish, love,” she said, reaching up to brush her fingers over his face.

He caught her fingers and kissed them.

Ziafiata stared. They really weren’t attempting to hide anything, were they? What was their

connection? Was the Princess of Islaigne Remy’s daughter? And what did his wife think of all this?

Had she really used cainlach on someone? Ziafiata had far too many questions, and she couldn’t ask

them, not of royalty.

Besides, they were leaving now, with all their musqueteers and the other armed men. They were

wrapping their dark cloaks tight and going for the door. Soon, they had all disappeared into the

darkness and the door had closed behind them.

The tavern was quiet for a moment, everyone staring in their wake.

And then the conversation started again, and then the music picked back up, and all was as if

nothing had happened.

“A king and queen in my tavern,” whispered Chevolere.

“Yes,” said Ziafiata. “It’s rather exciting. And they’re quite mysterious. Have you heard the rumors of all that passed between them?”

Chevolere turned to her, smirking. “You’re as bad as Marta.”

“I am not,” said Ziafiata. “Although I bet her roommate will be beside herself when she finds out

they were here.”

“No one will believe it,” said Chevolere. “Even the people in the tavern don’t know what they

saw. And I've not profited a bit from the experience, so perhaps it is as if it never happened at all."

"I don't understand why those men were armed," said Ziafiata. "They weren't musqueteers, but

they had guns. Only the musqueteers can control the living flame, unless they were like the king, who was blessed with the power of the living flame and could start fires with his mind. But, then,

apparently, he can't anymore."

"If he could, I imagine he would have burned the cainlach himself," said Chevolere. "It is all quite curious. And I wouldn't think the Order would be pleased to allow even the Queen of Islaigne to

flaunt their secrets."

"What secrets?"

"It's not living flame in the guns," said Chevolere.

"What? Of course it is," she said.

"Anyone can shoot one of those guns," said Chevolere. "It's a matter of aiming it and pulling the

trigger. It's nothing mystical. No magic involved."

Her lips parted in astonishment. That couldn't be. She'd been taught her entire life that the Order was in possession of the living flame, and the musqueteers were the proof.

"I know this from my dealings with pirates," said Chevolere. "I'm sure you're aware they use

cannons on their boats, and they're quite willing to steal rifles and pistols and musquets and put them to use as well."

She furrowed her brow. “I… I hadn’t thought about pirates.” But she had heard that pirates took

down ships with cannons, and she had never examined it. Why not? Was she particularly stupid?

Maybe it was only that when something was passed down as sacred knowledge, one didn’t think to

question it. “You buy your cainlach and iubilia from pirate shipments.”

“Indeed,” he said. “Don’t go spreading this about, however. The Order leaves us alone here in the

Barrens, for they are corrupt, and they partake far too much of our businesses and pleasures. We all know that the carales don’t follow their vows. But they are ruthless with anyone who wants to take

their power. Without the living flame, they are nothing. They will defend that with everything they have.”

“No, of course,” she said. “I will keep it to myself.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Chevolere watched when Ziafiata procured herself another glass of ale. But she did not drunkenly

make her way into his quarters, and he found he was almost disappointed by that. Why, he didn’t

know. There was nothing he could do with her if she were to show up.

And it wasn’t as if she would wish him to do anything, either.

She might not truly loathe him, but she was only working with him because it served her purpose.

He didn’t have any illusions that she was attracted to him. His obsession with her was utterly one

sided.

He lay awake for far too long hoping for her arrival, though, and then his sleep was interrupted by one of the tavern workers knocking on his door in the early morning to say that word had come back

from Donato.

Chevolere got up and dressed and opened the door. “Wait. You can tell the news to both Ziafiata

and I.” He crossed to knock on her door.

“What?” she called from within in a sleep-ravaged voice.

“News from Donato,” he called back.

The door was wrenched open only a moment later. She was only wearing her shift, and her hair

was in a messy braid. It was sticking up on one side, and he liked that. She was adorable and eager and her knees and calves were bare. He wanted to stare at them, but he forced himself not to.

The news was that Donato had agreed to a meeting that evening. He would host them both in his

home on the other side of the city for dinner. But he wanted a significant amount of iubilia to

accompany them or he wasn’t interested in meeting at all.

Chevolere readily agreed to the terms, sending his employee down to convey the information to the

messenger from Donato.

“Thank you,” said Ziafiata, giving him a radiant smile before she disappeared back into her room.

When he saw her later, she was dressed and coiffed, and he missed the way she’d looked with her

hair askew.

For the first time, he began to consider what would happen if Ziafiata did manage to take over her

father’s business interests. She would leave him, and she wouldn’t be around all the time. He

wouldn’t see her in the tavern, begging ale from the bartenders, and he wouldn’t see her with her hair mussed from sleeping, and he wouldn’t see her bare calves or toes…

Well, that would be better. She was distracting.

He spent the rest of the day gathering up the iubilia he would need and then getting ready for the

dinner with Donato. Ziafiata came out in a similar dress to the one she’d worn to meet with Linguio, though this one was a deep emerald green.

He had a difficult time tearing his gaze away from her, so he resolved not to look at her, but she

made it difficult because she stood so close to him.

“I was thinking,” she said, “is it really so bad if they think we’re sharing a bed?”

He swallowed very hard.

“I don’t think it’s so bad,” she said.

“Perhaps not,” he managed.

When they arrived at Donato’s home, the man at the door wished to divest them of all their

weapons, and this made Chevolere nervous.

But Ziafiata assured him it was standard procedure for a dinner amongst those in a crime family,

that weapons were always left behind. She said that no one would be armed.

However, when they arrived in the dining room, there were at least six musqueteers, all with

pistols in their holsters. They were being paid off by the family just as Chevolere paid his own

musqueteers. He wished he would have brought some of his own.

Ziafiata seemed surprised to see the musqueteers. When Chevolere asked her about it, she

murmured that she was certain they wouldn’t stay during the dinner.

They did, however.

The dining room was overly ornate. The accents of the walls were gilded in shimmering gold.

There were large, gilded-framed portraits as well. The dangling chandelier overhead dripped glitz

and precious metals. The tablecloth was embroidered with gold as well. The plates were edged in it.

Even the silverware was jewel encrusted.

Donato sat opposite them as they were served soup in golden bowls. “I know it might be

customary to wait until we'd gotten to dessert to talk business, but I find I am more curious than I can say about what this is all about. Could we talk about it now?"

"Why not?" said Ziafiata, eyeing the musqueteers. "It is a simple matter of wanting to sell you

some iubilia. I know that the men under you sometimes make use of it. Indeed, sometimes it is given out as a reward. We could supply it for you."

The plan was to establish a relationship with the caporegimes. Once they were used to dealing

with Ziafiata, then when she stepped into place as head of the family after her father was gone, they would be all the more likely to fall into line and back her claim.

"But we get our supply from your father," said Donato. "I don't think he'd be pleased to have his

cut taken out."

She shrugged. "He doesn't have to know. I remember hearing him complain about the overuse of

iubilia amongst his men. He rations it, does he not?"

Donato sat back in his chair, surveying her. Abruptly, he turned to Chevolere. "This is your doing.

It's well known that you have some quarrel with Federo Abrusse. Now, you have his daughter

dancing like a puppet, sir, but I can see the strings."

"This wasn't my idea," said Chevolere.

"If you think I wish to weaken my own street lord in order to strengthen the position of the Beast of the Barrens—"

“It’s not about him,” said Ziafiata.

Chevolere sighed, turning to her. “This is why it’s bad if they think we’re sharing a bed, you see?”

She nodded.

“We’re not,” said Chevolere, turning back to Donato.

But what he saw when he turned was not Donato, but rather a whirl of movement, and he couldn’t

make out what it was. His instinct was to duck, and so he did, but he wasn’t fast enough, because it struck him.

Pain.

He put his hand to it.

He was bleeding.

And now, he was putting it together. That whirling thing had been a knife. Donato had hurled it at

Chevolere’s head. It had sliced into his cheek, and now blood was getting all over his mask.

Blazes. It wasn’t easy to get blood out of leather. Luckily, he had spares, but not with him.

And why was he thinking about his mask when Donato had another throwing knife in his hand?

Donato was on his feet. “Federo knows that you have some quarrel with him. He knows you wish

him harm. He knows you wish to use his own daughter against him. This is from Feder—”

A crack interrupted him.

A red hole opened up in the middle of Donato’s face, shattering the bridge of his nose.

Donato swayed on his feet and then fell forward, face splattering in his soup.

Chevolere turned to see that Ziafiata was holding a gun. She must have gotten it from one of the

musqueteers, all of whom were now moving towards her.

Chevolere leaped for her. “Stop!” he shouted at the musqueteers. “Whatever Donato is paying you,

I’ll double it.”

One of the musqueteers lifted his pistol.

“Triple it!” said Chevolere, pointing at the man.

He lowered his pistol.

Chevolere looked around at the others. “Are we agreed?”

“One of us is going to have to claim to have shot him,” said the musqueteer with the pistol. “It

can’t be known she did it.”

“What if I want it known?” said Ziafiata.

“Blazes, Ziafiata.” Chevolere glared at her.

She glared back. “We’ll say I threw a knife at him.”

“It doesn’t look like a knife wound,” said one of the musqueteers.

She shrugged. “I want the credit.” She turned to Chevolere. “You’ll pay them more to make it

work?”

Chevolere let out an annoyed sound.

“I did just save your life,” she pointed out.

“Yes,” he said. “But I think I saved yours, too, because if I hadn’t intervened—”

“We could start a fire,” said one of the musqueteers. “If he was burned, no one would know how

he died.”

“Perfect,” said Ziafiata.

“I expect to be paid for that idea,” said the musqueteer, giving Chevolere a smile.

“Of course you do,” said Chevolere.

Ziafiata snatched a napkin up from the table and pressed it into Chevolere’s cheek. “You really are bleeding, aren’t you?”

He flinched at her touch, putting his own hand up to take the napkin and moving backward. “Thank

you,” he said. “And, of course, everyone will be paid.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chevolere tried to clean the bloody mask on his own, but he wasn’t having much luck. He thought

it might be ruined. He stood at the basin in his quarters, the water stained with his own blood, and gazed at himself maskless in the mirror.

This was all growing more complicated, wasn't it? He hadn't signed on to help Ziafiata kill all the caporegimes in the Abrusse family, and he wasn't sure how it helped her if she did. Who was to say

that Donato's replacement would be any more agreeable than Donato had been?

There was a knock at his door.

"One moment," he called. He dried his hands on a towel and went to find another mask. He tied it

on as he walked to the door to open it.

It was Ziafiata.

"Something I can do for you?" he said. Of course it was Ziafiata. Who else would it be? It was late now. The tavern was closed. The music had stopped nearly three-quarters of an hour ago. There was

no one else in the building besides her.

She was dressed for bed, but she had a blue cloak over her nightdress, and it was buttoned down

to her waist. Her hair was braided again, but it was tidy now.

His gaze skittered over her. He wanted her to go away. "I find I'm tired, Ziafiata. Perhaps this

could wait until morning?"

She laced her fingers together. "Oh, of course, I'm sorry." She turned away.

He started to close the door.

She turned back. "You think I made a mistake."

“What?” He opened the door again.

“You didn’t want me to spread the fact that I killed Donato.”

“Well, I don’t see what killing a caporegime gets you,” he said.

“A reputation of strength,” she said. “I’m a woman, and I can’t afford to seem soft at all. Killing a man, burning his house down, it’s only going to shape what people say about me.”

He shrugged. “I suppose.”

“Truly, I… I didn’t think before I did it,” she said. “When I saw that knife coming for you, I…” She bit down on her lip.

“You what?”

She peered over his shoulder. “Can I come in?”

He hesitated. And then he stepped away from the door, spreading both of his hands to indicate she

was welcome to do as she wished.

She stepped inside, and she shut the door behind her. She fiddled with one of the buttons on her

cloak. “You were very quick evading the blade.”

“Not quick enough.” He touched his cheek, which was bandaged now.

“Well, not quick enough to avoid injury, I suppose, but you’re alive.” She drew in a breath and let it out and then crossed over to the window. She put her hand against the glass, gazing down at the

street below. “I have to admit, the thought of your… of your not being alive, I hadn’t expected to…”

His mask didn’t quite seem secure. He reached back to retie it. “I should thank you for saving my

life. Have I done that?”

“I think so,” she said.

“*You* were quick,” he said. “Getting that pistol. It was inspired.”

“No one was watching me,” she said. “They underestimate me. They think I’m under your control,

but I’ll soon show them otherwise.”

“Of course you will.” Mask tighter, he crossed to stand beside her. The window was between

them. They weren’t so very close. Perhaps, though, they were too close. He found himself thinking of the shape of her body beneath that cloak, and though he thought he had memorized every curve and

slope of her, he wished to see her again. He clenched a hand into a fist and released it.

They were quiet.

The moonlight spilled through the window, silvery white.

Everything was still and silent.

“I shouldn’t care, of course,” she suddenly burst out with.

“About?”

“Whether you live or die,” she said.

“Ah.”

“But I do,” she said, and her voice was suddenly softer than it had been a moment ago.

He cleared his throat. “I’m currently useful to you, so—”

“Not like that,” she said.

It was quiet again.

Then she started to speak again, her voice hardly louder than a whisper. “I think sometimes about

the way you looked at me when you were trying to get the location of the key out of me.”

“Must we speak of that?” His voice wasn’t strong.

“I didn’t enjoy it,” she said.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“But when I remember it, I…”

“Ziafiata, perhaps you should go find your bed.”

“I suppose that I feel sorry for you in some way,” she said. “Because of what happened with your

sister. It seems rather too hard on you that you have lost her and become so hardened and deadened by revenge and then also lost the ability to take comfort in… in someone’s arms. It seems too much for one person, and I suppose…”

“I don’t need your pity.” It was a growl.

“You said that you had never done to a woman what you’d done to me,” she said. “But you didn’t

really do much, did you?”

“Ziafiata—”

“All you did was look at me,” she said. “You made a lot of threats, and you cut off my clothes and

you pressed your…” She looked at his crotch.

He looked at his crotch. His trousers were growing tight. “You should go.” His voice was hoarse.

“So, did you mean that you’d never looked at a woman before? You can’t have meant that. Of

course you’d seen—”

“Not close like that,” he breathed. “Not inches away.”

She sucked in a noisy breath.

“I’ve seen before, but I’d never really… looked.” Why was he saying this to her? “I always looked

away. But I had to make you think that I wanted you—”

“You do want me.” This was a fact.

“Yes.”

“Would you like to look again?”

He choked.

“I shouldn’t show you,” she said. “You don’t deserve it.”

“No, I don’t, and I don’t even want…”

She started to unbutton her cloak.

“Ziafiata, please.” What was he begging her for? To stop? To continue? He felt something scalding

rising inside him. It was spreading through his core.

“I’m not doing it for you,” she said. “I only want…” Her fingers stilled for a moment, and they

trembled slightly. But then they started to move again, deftly, determinedly. “What you said about

killing again making you even more numb and blank, it’s true for me too. And I want to feel…

something. I want to feel your gaze on me. Will you look?”

“Blazes,” he groaned.

“As a favor to me,” she said, and now her cloak was entirely unbuttoned. Beneath, her nightdress

was white and filmy and almost translucent. Her fingers went to the ribbon at the top and she untied it.

It parted, opening to reveal the valley between her breasts.

The feeling inside him seared him.

“Chevolere?” she whispered. “Will you?”

“Yes,” he rasped.

She tugged aside one side of her nightdress to bare one of her breasts to him.

It was more lovely than he remembered, rounded and high and firm. The air tickled it, and the

nipple tightened. His mouth was dry. He was hotly aroused. He was trembling.

She looked up at him, taking in the way he gaped at her. She let out a shaky breath. “What do you

think?”

“Beautiful,” he said huskily.

“Do you want to see the other one?”

“Can I?”

She covered herself and then pulled aside the other side of her nightdress and there was a perfect

twin, just as round and lovely as the first.

He felt unsteady, and he leaned into the wall to hold him up.

“You like that, then?” Her voice was teasing and knowing, but he didn’t mind. He liked it.

“I am… *yes*.”

She let out a pleased, breathy giggle.

“Could I… would you show me both at once?”

Her laugh deepened, knowing as well. “You’re growing rather bold, Chevolere.”

“You can refuse me.” He was speaking to her bare skin, not to her face, and he didn’t care. “You

can do anything you like.”

She tugged aside the other side of her nightdress.

He might have moaned.

She let out a pleased noise, acknowledging that.

“They are perfect,” he said. “*You* are perfect.”

She laughed again.

Now it was silent again, but the silence was different now, charged with something powerful, like

the rush of white water over rocks in a stream.

She took a step closer to him.

He sighed. “You’re standing in front of the window. What if someone sees you?”

“No one’s on the streets at this hour.”

He reached out and tugged the curtains closed just the same.

Another laugh from her. “Was that to protect me or because you don’t wish to share the sight of me

with anyone else?”

“Both,” he decided. He managed to tear his gaze from her breasts to lift it to her face. He smiled at her.

“Do you want to touch me?”

He swallowed. “I do. But I can’t.”

“Are you sure? If you never looked at a woman, then you’ve probably never tried.”

The fire in him turned dark and cold. It stabbed him, and everything about this was wrong.

He looked at the floor. “Cover yourself.”

“But, Chevolere—”

“*Now*.” His voice thundered. He turned his back on her.

“I know it must be frightening, but perhaps if you—”

“You’d best go,” he cut her off, his voice brisk.

“A moment ago, you—”

“That was a moment ago,” he said.

She sighed.

“Please.” His voice broke.

“Of course,” she whispered.

He didn’t turn around until he’d heard the door open and shut in her wake. Then, he was alone in

his room, and inside him, he roiled—fire and pain and cold in a swirling storm of frustration.

* * *

Ziafiata went back to her room and took off her cloak. She climbed into bed and pulled the

blankets up over her nightdress. There was an insistent pressure between her thighs. Nothing had

happened. She’d done nothing except move some fabric and let him see her, and she felt rather

horribly aroused.

She rolled over onto her side, but now her legs were pressed together, and that seemed to make it

worse.

Onto her back again, then.

She stared at the ceiling.

You wanted to feel something, she reminded herself.

She swallowed, and then she shut her eyes, and thrust her fingers between her legs. She thought of

Chevolere's raw voice saying she was perfect as she stroked herself. Inside her, pleasure rushed

through her like a raging blaze.

When it burst, a collection of sparks—an explosion—it left her gasping as tremors tore through her

hips and thighs.

What if he heard her?

She rolled over, burying her face in her pillow.

On second thought, she didn't care if he did hear. Maybe she wanted him to hear.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

If she expected any acknowledgment of what had passed between them from Chevolere, she was

wrong. He was unaffected the next day, no different than usual, neither more familiar with her nor

more stiff and formal.

This annoyed her, for some reason. She wanted it to have mattered, she decided, even if it was

really nothing. He hadn't even touched her, so maybe it shouldn't warrant acknowledgment. But it

seemed momentous to her. She had derived more pleasure from it than every time that Diago had been

inside her.

She knew it had affected Chevolere, so for him to ignore it made her want to demand that he…

Well, she didn't know what she wanted to demand. She wasn't sure what she wanted from him.

She hadn't thought that through. She hadn't thought any of it through. He couldn't touch her, so there was no real future in it, was there? It might have been very affecting this time for him to look at her, but would that be enough, if that was all it ever was?

She had never given much thought to wanting a man for her own pleasure. She had always assumed

she would not be interested in such things, considering her experiences with Diago. And perhaps it

would be the same with Chevolere. Perhaps the act between men and women always amounted to that

same thing, invasive and a bit painful.

But perhaps not, as well.

If she could bring herself pleasure—something she rarely did, admittedly, finding it usually too

much trouble to be worth it—maybe she could find it with someone else.

But that person couldn’t be Chevolere, of course, because he wouldn’t—couldn’t—touch her.

She resolved to try not to think about it, then, and she focused instead on meeting with the other

caporegimes of the Abrusse family. She’d decided she didn’t feel comfortable going to them anymore.

It was too dangerous, especially since the other caporegimes might try to kill Chevolere for her father.

Instead, she proposed that they invite the two remaining caporegimes to the tavern for a private

audience, and Chevolere agreed it was a good idea.

Messengers were sent out, and they both came back with refusals from the caporegimes, who said

that she was likely only trying to lure them to their deaths.

She sent back word that everyone would surrender their weapons and that they would all be

allowed to bring extra men for protection.

By evening, they had acquiesced warily and she set about planning for what they would serve and

how they would set up the tavern to host them.

Eventually, the tavern closed, and she still hadn’t formalized all her ideas. She should have been

exhausted, but she felt wide awake. She wanted to get this right, or she didn’t think she’d be able to sleep.

Chevolere looked in on her, saying he noticed she still had lamps lit.

She was sitting on her bed, and she got up. “You can come in,” she said.

He stepped inside. “Are you still working on the event at the tavern?”

“I don’t want it to seem as if it’s something you would set up,” she said. “So, I thought that I should have them fix dishes that wouldn’t normally be served at a tavern. But then I realized that if you really were the mastermind, you would have gotten that information from me anyway, and I thought why

bother? The tavern staff is good at what they make. Does it matter?”

“I don’t think it does,” he said.

“Yes, so then why can’t I decide?”

“You should sleep on it.”

“Oh, I can’t sleep,” she said, thrusting her hands into her hair.

“Well, I’m exhausted,” he said.

“Oh, don’t let me keep you,” she said, gesturing in the direction of his room. “Didn’t you sleep

well last night?”

“I, er… after you left my room, I was…” He cleared his throat.

She felt her face get hot. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t think. I spent half the day thinking about that, but then it somehow slipped my mind. We don’t have to speak of it. I know you don’t wish to.”

“You spent half the day thinking of it?”

Oh, had she said that out loud? “I told myself to stop thinking about it, and then I did.”

“What were you thinking?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “Because nothing happened.”

“Right,” she said, shrugging. “And I told myself I don’t need you to act differently with me,

because it was nothing.”

“I thought I *was* acting differently.”

“You did?”

“Wasn’t I?”

“No.” She glared at him.

“Well, I’ve felt dreadfully self-conscious all day.”

“Why? I didn’t see any part of your body. Blazes, you could have taken your mask off at least, so

that I could have seen your expression.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t think of that. My apologies.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“Do you want me to take off my mask now? Would that make up for it?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “It’s only your face. I suppose if you wanted to make up for it, you

should take off your tunic.”

He swallowed visibly. “Would you promise not to touch me?”

Her lips parted. “Are we really talking about…?”

“If you don’t want me to—”

“I didn’t say that.” She squared her shoulders. “Very well, then. Both your mask and your tunic.”

She waited expectantly.

He didn’t move for a moment. Then he went back and shut the door, which didn’t matter, because

they were only the two people in the whole of the building. But then he reached back and untied his mask and pulled it away from his face.

She looked at him, and she couldn’t stop a smile from overtaking her features. He was a very

handsome man with his light gray eyes and his dark hair and his straight nose. He was striking.

He shoved the mask into the pocket of his trousers and seized the bottom of his tunic with both

hands.

“Well,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “What are you waiting for?”

He cast his gaze down, and she saw his dark eyelashes fan against his cheeks, and there was the

bandage from where he’d almost been killed by Donato, and suddenly, her heart squeezed.

She almost reached for him, but she stopped herself just in time.

He pulled his tunic over his head.

Her smile widened. His shoulders were broad and his body was shaped like a V. His muscles

weren't prominent, but they did ripple beneath his skin as he balled up the tunic and shifted it back and forth in his hands.

"I suppose that makes us even?" he said to her.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose. Although I don't think it's quite the same to see a man's chest as it is to see a woman's."

"But I'm not wearing the mask either."

"True," she said, her gaze settling on his flat stomach, and the way his hair grew thicker below his belly button.

"You're…" He cleared his throat again. "You seem rather more interested in looking at me than I

would have thought."

She smirked. "Are you fishing for a compliment there, Chevolere?"

"No, I only… you don't… you loathe me. You wanted to feel something last night you said, but you

don't find me pleasing. You couldn't."

"I find you more pleasing without a shirt than with one," she said in an amused voice.

"Blazes, I'm getting dressed."

"Don't," she said, her voice sharp.

He froze, looking up at her.

Her gaze got snared in his, and she could do nothing but look into his eyes as the moments ticked

by.

When she finally did look away, it was different somehow. Everything was different.

Wordlessly, she began unlacing her bodice. She was wearing a casual outfit that was much more

like a tavern wench's than anything else she owned. She found them more comfortable than stays and

easier to get on and off herself.

"You don't have to…"

"Do you not wish to see me?" she said, casting questioning eyes up at him.

"Of course I want to see," he said. "But this… it's only going to make us both miserable in the end.

There's nowhere to go."

She shrugged out of her bodice. She crossed to her wardrobe and hung it from a hook within. She

untucked her blouse and pulled it over her head. When she looked up, she saw that Chevolere had

followed her. He was a foot away, maskless and shirtless. She was naked from the waist up as well.

His gaze eagerly drank her in, and she did find that seeing his face without the mask was gratifying.

His expression was so hungry and awed.

She arched her back, pushing out her breasts, and took a step toward him.

He shook his head slightly. "Ziafiata…"

She took another step closer.

He took a step back. Without his tunic, she could see the way his breeches clung to him, and she

could see he was aroused.

The sight made something leap low in her belly, and she shivered.

“W-we might as well simply put our clothes back on.” His voice was like midnight.

“You won’t touch me,” she said.

“You know that I—”

“And I can’t touch you?”

“No. Why are you—?”

“What if I touched myself?”

He let out a huff of air and he shuddered.

She took that as assent, and she reached up to cup her own breast.

He grunted.

She smiled. She stroked her thumb over her nipple, making it stiffen. She toyed with the tip, briefly closing her eyes against the sensations that darted into the center of her.

His jaw hung loose from his mouth as he watched.

She touched her other breast, giving the same attention to her other nipple.

He moaned.

She gasped. She closed her thumb and forefinger around both her nipples at the same time, giving

them a gentle tug. She gasped again.

“That…” His voice was thick. “You like that? It doesn’t hurt you?”

“I wasn’t very forceful,” she breathed.

“Oh,” he said.

“I could be,” she said, pinching herself again, harder. “I could… there’s a point up to which a little pain is also good somehow.”

He was mesmerized by her breasts. “They look even stiffer now. Are they?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s about how it works. The more that they’re touched, the harder they are.”

He swallowed again. “And you mostly touch… the tips.”

“That’s the most sensitive part,” she said. “But would you like to watch me…” She gathered her

breasts up in both of her hands and squeezed them close together. “Do this?”

“I like… whatever you’re…”

She kneaded her breasts. “Or this?”

He let out a throaty noise.

She let go of herself. “Maybe, Chevolere, if I helped you.”

“Helped me?” He was still staring at her naked skin.

She reached out and took his hand.

He startled, going rigid. His wide eyes met hers, horrified.

“Here,” she said, tugging on his hand, bringing it up. “If I guide you there, you know that I want it, that it’s not hurting me. There’s no reason to deny something we both want.”

He grimaced. “Let go of me.” His voice was insubstantial.

“Just try it.”

“Please?” He sounded like a little boy, and his expression was frightened.

She faltered. “Are you certain that you can’t—”

He yanked his hand back, and another shudder went through him, but this one didn’t look pleasant.

“I…” She felt wretched. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Don’t apologize for this. Please don’t apologize.” His gaze swept her.

“This is… you have no idea how much I…” He put his fingers to his lips. Then he turned his back on

her. “But I need to go now.”

“Do you?” she said, feeling disappointed. “If I promise not to touch you again? You could simply

watch me again, nothing more.”

“Perhaps…” The muscles in his back tensed and released. “Perhaps another night, I could… we

could do this again.”

“Yes,” she hissed immediately. She wanted that.

“Good,” he breathed. He lurched forward, finding his tunic and shrugging into it. “Good night,

Ziafiata,” he said, but he didn’t turn around. Instead, he staggered toward the door and disappeared through it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

But he didn’t come back the following night, and when Ziafiata went to him, he spoke to her

through the closed door to his quarters, telling her he was tired and that he only wished to sleep.

The next night, she didn’t ask, and he didn’t come.

But he was different with her, she thought, if only in the way his gaze would find her immediately

when she came into the room, if only because he couldn’t seem to entirely repress his naked hunger

for her when they accidentally caught each other’s gaze.

And she felt too hot in his presence, as if her clothes itched, as if he could see through them, as if he was ogling her no matter what was going on or who else was there.

She was consumed with preparations for the caporegimes, whose names were Boneti and Scavo,

and she spent the coming days and nights exchanging fiery glances with Chevolere and making the

tavern ready.

Finally, the appointed day arrived, and she and Chevolere closed the tavern early to await their

guests.

The time for their arrival came and went, and she tried to tell herself that she should not be

nervous about it, because it was typical for men to be late in the city of Rzymn. It meant nothing.

But her heart still beat in her throat, and there was no relief when she looked at Chevolere,

because he made her pulse race for entirely different reasons.

Finally, they arrived together, in the company of their men. She and Chevolere made a show of

allowing their men to search them for weapons, though Chevolere's lips were pressed so tightly

together that they were bloodless when he watched the other men's hands on her, feeling over her

arms and legs to see if she had anything concealed.

She wasn't sure if he was affected because he was jealous or if he was imagining his hands where

their hands were, and whatever the case, she couldn't deny she liked it. Maybe that was horrid,

considering that it didn't seem pleasant for him, but she didn't care. She'd suffered for him, perhaps it was his turn.

Scavo noticed Chevolere's reaction as well, and he mentioned it when they were all seated

together. "You are possessive of her," he said. "So, why the charade? Do you really think you can

pretend not to be bedding her? It is preposterous."

"I'm not," said Chevolere, nostrils flaring. He seized a bottle of wine on the table and filled his goblet. They were all serving themselves, because they'd decided that the caporegimes would feel

more comfortable if there weren't a lot of servants in the room waiting on them. Fewer people

equaled fewer threats. He began filling Scavo's goblet as well.

"I don't really appreciate how every time I have a conversation with anyone, that's all they seem to wish to talk about," said Ziafiata.

"Well, you might as well get used to it," said Boneti. "After all, he's a key component to your

business transactions, I understand. You may say you wish to create some contract between yourself

and us, but he's part of it, and everyone is going to speculate. In my case, however, I don't see that it has to be a problem. I see advantages to an alliance with Chevolere. He does control some key

resources in the Rzymn, and having your whispers on his pillow could be beneficial."

"No, no," said Scavo. "Women are weak, and he only uses them ill. He's broken her and now she's

simply his creature."

"I assure you, it's not that way," said Chevolere.

"So, what way is it?" said Scavo.

"He did try," said Ziafiata, holding out her goblet pointedly to Chevolere, who had filled

everyone’s glass but hers. “But he didn’t find me so easy to break.”

Chevolere poured her wine. “No, I did not. She fought like a wild animal. After I got clawed

enough times, I decided she wasn’t worth the trouble.”

Scavo let out a guffaw.

Boneti laughed softly.

“Oh, I don’t believe it,” said Scavo. “A little thing like that?”

“Would you like to see the marks?” Chevolere lifted his chin, giving Scavo an amused smile.

Scavo drank some wine. “I’m sure that won’t be necessary.”

“She’s very fierce,” said Chevolere, turning to look at her. “You heard what became of Diago

Caputio, I suppose?”

“That was *her*?” said Scavo. “I thought that was a ridiculous rumor.”

“And you *did* dispatch Donato,” said Boneti thoughtfully. “That rumor is also true.”

“I decided that I would be better off leaving her be,” said Chevolere. “She’d probably have

dispatched me as well if she didn’t have some use for me.”

“Would you kill Chevolere?” said Boneti.

“No, we have an arrangement,” said Ziafiata. “My father taught me that it is not wise to double-

cross one’s business partners.”

“Will you kill us as you killed Donato?” said Boneti.

“No, I don’t wish to kill anyone,” said Ziafiata. “I am trying to broker a simple arrangement for the sale of iubilia.”

“Oh, that’s all this is about?” scoffed Scavo. “I beg to differ. Something else is afoot. Even a blind man could see that.”

“There is not,” said Ziafiata, leveling her gaze at him. “Think of it from my point of view, sir. I have spent a life stifled by my father, cast aside, gambled away. But I am no weak thing, and I have found a way to try to make something for myself. It’s only natural that I should try to make my way in the world that I know best—which is the underbelly of Rzymn. All I need is a chance. I’m prepared to offer a fair price on the iubilia.”

“And your lover is willing to provide it for you?”

“We are both benefiting from the sale,” she said. “I bring knowledge of the Abrusse family to the

table, and he brings the product and the connections. If you must have it that there is more to our relationship than mutual financial advantage, I suppose I cannot stop you from thinking it, however.”

“Don’t think it hasn’t been noticed that Chevolere has not visited Madame Vadima in some time,”

said Scavo.

Ziafiata turned to look at him.

“Haven’t I?” Chevolere shrugged. “I suppose it slipped my mind.”

“Too busy with your new plaything,” said Scavo.

Chevolere shook his head.

“What does that part of it matter?” said Ziafiata, frustrated. “Can we please negotiate iubilia?”

“I, for one, want to hear your rates,” said Boneti.

“As do I,” said Scavo. “Here’s what I can say. If it becomes a conflict of interest with your father, I have no choice but to side with him. I have sworn him an oath. But if it can benefit us all, I am interested.”

“Yes,” said Boneti. “Yes, so am I.”

“And if it becomes clear Chevolere is simply using you against the Abrusse family, I will not

hesitate to find some way to have him killed,” said Scavo.

“You can try,” said Chevolere dismissively.

“I assure you, I am not Chevolere’s plaything,” she said.

* * *

Madame Vadima was shuffling cards when Chevolere entered the room. “Ah, you’re here this time.

You’ve been absent for our last two appointments.”

“Did you miss me?” He took off his cape and hung it on a hook by the door.

She smirked. Madame Vadima was relatively young for the position she held, running the whole

brothel. She always wore her hair slicked into a severe bun at the back of her head and wore a bodice that covered her from collar to wrist. She appeared more like a strict governess than a woman of ill-repute.

Perhaps that was why he’d picked her for this little ruse of his. Perhaps it was comforting that he never had to look at her skin.

She tucked the cards neatly into a pile and set them down on the table. The room where they met

was a large bedroom, and there was a bed against one wall, covered in sumptuous silky red

coverlets, which were enticingly turned down. The table was on the other side of the room, flanked

by two high-backed upholstered chairs. She leaned back against the chair, tilting her head to one side.

“I hear I’ve been jilted.”

He crossed the room and pulled out the chair opposite her, sitting down. “Oh, come now, Vadima,

you know no one could replace you in my heart. What shall we play today?” He reached for the cards.

She put a hand protectively over the pile. “Not so fast. You have never missed an appointment with

me, not in all the years you have been coming here, and now you miss two in a row and then try to

pretend as if nothing has changed? I don’t think so.”

“Nothing *has* changed,” he said.

“Is it true what they say?” said Madame Vadima. “Have you taken that Abrusse girl into your

bed?”

“No,” he said.

She looked him over. Then she slid the cards across the table. “Towering Inferno?”

That was the name of a card game. He nodded. “Fine with me. You wish me to deal?”

“I believe it’s your turn, though it has been so long since I’ve seen you, I could be wrong.”

“I don’t see why you’re harping on this,” he said, cutting the deck in two. “You’re paid in advance.

You have received compensation for doing absolutely nothing. I would think you’d be pleased.”

“It’s not about the money,” she said.

He began to deal out the cards, seven each, one for her, one for him, one for her, one for him, and so on. “No? Then perhaps you’re jealous?”

She laughed. “Yes, it’s exactly that.” Her voice was rich and amused. “I can’t tell you the

gratification I derive from these games of cards we play.”

He lifted his gaze to her, his hands stilling, though he had two more cards to deal out. “*Do* you derive gratification from it?”

“From card playing?” She laughed. “Well, it can be quite engaging and there is a satisfaction to be gained from it, but—”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “I know you don’t entertain many men, that you are selective,

due to your position. But it was not always that way.”

“I think you’re the one who’s jealous,” she said lightly. She nodded. “Finish dealing, won’t you?”

He tossed out the remaining two cards and set the deck in the middle of the table. He swept his

own cards up and began organizing them by suit and number. He had a great many daggers, which

could be beneficial. It would depend upon what was in Vadima's hand, of course.

"It's rather sudden that you are so jealous," she said. "You've never shown any interest in wishing to bed me. What has that Abrusse girl done to you?"

"I don't have interest now," he said. "That's not why I ask."

She arranged her own cards, peering at him over them as though they were a fan and she the shy

coquette. "Why do you ask, then?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose I simply can't imagine how it could be gratifying."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Hmm. What a thing to say, Chevolere. I've always theorized that you were

like the musqueteers, preferring boys in your bed, and that you were worried if that was known, it

could be a liability to you. But can it be that you are not at all interested, not in boys or girls?"

"I believe you throw the first card, since I dealt," he said.

"It's not unheard of, you know." She put down a card. It was the queen of stones.

He must put down another queen, which could change the suit, or else a higher card in the suit of

stones. She had started with such a high card simply to be disagreeable, he was certain. It made it all the more difficult for him. He put down the queen of daggers.

“There are people who simply have no interest at all. In all people, I suppose, it is a spectrum.

Some have a deeper desire and interest than others. I cater, of course, to those who have difficulty being sated.” She put down the queen of roses, changing the suit again.

He pursed his lips and drew a card. And then another, and another. It took him five cards to finally draw the king of roses, which he slapped down. “Do *you* have a desire for it?”

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Is it simply a job for you? A task that must be completed? Do you play a role, pretending for the

men you service, or do you like it?”

“If you’re thinking of renegotiating our arrangement, darling, and you have some qualms about…”

Her voice dropped suggestively. “Using me, you should know that I—”

“No,” he said flatly. He nodded. “It’s your turn.”

She considered her cards and then played the king of rods. “I’m very confused right now.”

He put down the king of daggers. “It’s a simple question. Do you enjoy your work. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” she said.

He looked at her for several long moments. “Truly?”

“Is it so difficult to believe?” She began to draw cards from the deck. She drew three and then put down the una of daggers.

He played the una of rods. “What do you like about it? It seems an invasive sort of thing and

fraught with its own unique dangers.”

“I like being admired, I suppose. Being wanted.” She gave him a small smile. “And there are

physical aspects of it that are… gratifying.”

“You find it pleasurable.”

“I do,” she said. “It’s your turn.”

“I have nothing,” he said. “Who starts a tower with the queen of blazing stones?” He set his cards

down, face up, giving up on the game.

“What dangers do you seem to think my work is fraught with?”

“Getting with child, for one,” he said.

“There are ways of preventing that.”

“Not without their own dangers,” he said.

“Perhaps,” she said. “Do you speak from experience, then? Is this what this is all about? Was there some poor, pretty village girl in your youth who you knocked up and who subsequently—”

“No.” Blazes, why had he abandoned the game? He peered down at the cards wistfully. “Birthing a

child is far from safe,” he continued. “And then there is the way that men treat women that they pay.

For instance, what I am supposed to be doing to you, even now.”

“Yes, but I would never allow a man with the twisted desires you supposedly have into my bed,”

she said.

“How would you stop me?” he said, blinking at her.

“I am not unarmed.” She reached into her collar and drew out a small sheathed dagger.

“You wouldn’t always have somewhere to hide that.”

“There is one under the pillow.” She gestured to the bed.

“Even so, if it is a struggle between you and a man, you are not guaranteed to prevail against him.

Most men are stronger than you are, I wager.”

“Once a man has shown himself to be… undesirable, he is blacklisted from all working women in

Rzymn,” she said. “No woman will take his money. No woman will service him. It is how we protect

each other. And if this does not deter him, often times, he is dispatched. I retain assassins on the payroll for such purposes.”

“Hmm,” said Chevolere, thinking about it. “So, if I had truly molested your girls and been

persistent about it, you would have had me killed?”

She smiled. “This is not what you actually wish to know, however, is it, Chevolere?”

He sighed. He got up from the table and walked over to the bed. He brushed his fingers over the

silky coverlet. “The entire idea of having a woman seems… brutish to me.”

“I suppose there’s some truth in that. There are things that separate us from the beasts in the field and wood, but this is not one of them. In this, we are all brutes.”

He glanced at her. “Yet, you still enjoy it.” He turned back to the bed, dragging his forefinger over the coverlet.

“Don’t you enjoy it?”

He lifted his hand from the coverlet and rubbed the side of his neck. “I… no. That is, I suppose

I’ve never truly made an attempt.”

“You, Chevolere, who is said to have a ravenous appetite for female flesh, has never taken a

woman to bed?”

He rounded on her. “I can trust you with this, can’t I?”

“Of course. I am nothing if not discreet, but I must admit, I don’t understand why you’re telling me now.”

“Neither do I.” He sighed again. “Do you suppose it’s been long enough, or ought I stay here

another quarter hour?”

“It’s that Abrusse girl, isn’t it?” she said. “You want to attempt it because of her.”

His shoulders slumped. “Perhaps.” He went back to her and sat down opposite her in the chair.

“You want to practice with me?”

“No.” He was horrified. “Of course not.”

She laughed. “I shall try not to be wounded by that response.”

He began to sweep the cards back together in a pile. “It’s not a commentary on you, Vadima. You

are very… well, I have never thought of you in that way, truly, but you must not be insecure in your charms or beauty.”

She laughed again. “Don’t trouble yourself with that, Chevolere. May I ask you something?”

“You’re going to ask me why I’m a virgin,” he said. “I don’t want to answer that.”

“It’s bad, then?” Her voice was soft.

He looked up at her. “Nothing was done to *me*, but… I witnessed… I really would rather not

discuss it.”

“Well, you wouldn’t be surprised to know that many of the women who work for me were

victimized in some way,” she said in that same soft voice.

He began to shuffle the cards. “No, I suppose I wouldn’t.”

“You might think that women who had been through such things would not be interested in ever

taking another man to bed,” she said. “But it is not that way. The brutish part of ourselves? The animal part? I don’t think it breaks the way that the mind does. It is simply trying to fulfill an instinct, you see, like eating or drinking. So, though we may build the act up inside ourselves, make it *mean* all manner of things, in the end it is just a natural inclination.”

He continued to shuffle the cards. “I don’t know if I understand what you’re trying to say.”

“More often than not, when I speak to these women, they are ashamed of themselves for still

feeling their own urges. They say, ‘How could I not be ruined for this forever? How could I still take pleasure in such a thing?’ They worry that what was done to them has altered them, made them wanton and sinful. And I tell them that the fact that they can still feel pleasure is a triumph, not a moral failing.

I tell them that they must take charge of their own bodies and their own desires, and that they must indulge, because that is the way to healing.”

He stopped shuffling and set the cards down.

“It’s remarkable the way the human spirit can heal itself, isn’t it?” she said.

He surveyed her. “Perhaps,” he said. And then, more quietly, “Perhaps.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Chevolere wasn’t sure what to make of what Madame Vadima had said. He thought perhaps there

was some truth in it, but he also felt it was a sad, dark fact of the society he lived in that women who had been hurt by men were tossed aside like refuse.

The whorehouse was full of victimized women because there was nowhere else for them to go

except to the sisters, and that was a punishing life full of denial and repression in service of the blaze.

So, they were forced to continue servicing men, forced to continue surrendering their bodies. It

became their only source of livelihood. He wasn’t sure it could really be such a healing experience if they didn’t have a choice.

Madame Vadima preferred her position in the city. She thought women had more freedom as

whores than they did as wives and daughters. That didn’t mean everyone agreed with her.

At any rate, Chevolere supposed that in his case, he did have a choice. He could try to heal.

But he was frightened, and he did not know if he could bear the prospect of it.

The feelings that rose within him when he saw Ziafiata divested of her clothing, they were

incredibly powerful. They seemed to seize him, to take control of him, like a ferocious wave crashing through his body, and he was frightened that he would be swept away by it, and that—in that frenzy—

he would hurt her somehow.

He was afraid he would become like those men who had hurt Allicionne. He was afraid that

brutishness lived within him somewhere.

He had been so young when it happened. He had been a boy, not Chevolere Vox but little Cecil

Mullins, the farm boy from Dumonte.

Certainly, he’d had some idea of sex and women before it all. Certainly, he’d had some unformed

and burgeoning desire. Maybe that desire would have been pure, if he hadn’t been tainted by the

violence of it all. But now, it was all twisted up inside him whenever he thought of it, and what if…

what if he was a beast? What if he was a monster?

He was terrified of that being true.

He could not live with himself if he caused Ziafiata pain.

Not when he'd already done so much to hurt her already.

He was thinking about this when he came back from Madame Vadima's, and when he let himself

into the tavern, which was still open, but would be closing soon. The music on stage was done, and

now the place was just conversation around tables for the few straggling patrons who had yet to

leave.

Ziafiata was not downstairs, though she usually was.

He looked about for her, but then he was distracted by one of the musicians coming to ask about

having someone come to tune the harpsichord, and he set about making himself a note to contact a

tuner. After that, there was one thing after another, and he did not climb the stairs to the upper level for nearly an hour.

At the top, he noticed that Ziafiata's door was shut tight.

He rapped on it softly with his knuckles. "Ziafiata?" he called. "Are you all right?"

No answer from within.

She must be asleep.

He turned away and went into his own room. He shut the door and reached back to untie his mask.

His door burst open.

He turned, slamming the mask back into place.

But it was only Ziafiata. “Well, you’re finally back, then. You were certainly gone a long time.”

There was an edge to her voice.

He removed his mask. There was no point in leaving it on. It was more comfortable without it, and

she had already seen him without it on more than one occasion. “I thought you were asleep.”

“What did you do with her? With your *madame?* ”

He raised his eyebrows. “I told you, we play cards.”

“Oh, that’s all, then.” She snorted.

He furrowed his brow. “Listen, I did this precisely because the caporegimes noticed and threw it

in our faces as proof of something. I went to see her for you.”

She scoffed.

“I don’t understand why you’re angry with me.”

“Do you ever ask her to let you see her body?”

“No.”

“Do you take off your mask for her?”

“You are remarkably irrational and insecure all of the sudden.”

“Oh, fine. Yes. You go off to spend *hours* with a whore, and then you insult me.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t want you to see her anymore.”

He blinked. “All right. May I inquire as to why?”

“Even if you’re only playing cards. Even if there is nothing occurring between you, people will

think there is, and I don’t want people to think that.”

“Because?”

“Because how am I to convince my father that you let me go if you’re still obsessed with your

whore?”

“Right,” he said. He supposed that made sense. It was rather at odds with what they seemed to be

attempting to convince the caporegimes of, though, wasn’t it? He puzzled over this, rubbing his chin, and then he was distracted by wondering whether he’d forgotten to shave that morning. There seemed

a bit too much growth there.

“After all this is done, you may go back to her and play all the games of cards you wish.” She

turned and swept out of the room.

He gazed after her, feeling horribly confused about whatever had just taken place.

* * *

Ziafiata woke to see Chevolere sitting at the foot of her bed. He was clad only in those loose

trousers he slept in. His chest and face were bare.

She blinked at him.

“Oh, good, you’re awake.” His voice was gravelly.

She sat up slowly. “I am now.” She couldn’t help but let her gaze travel over his bare shoulders.

His skin was smooth and his shoulders were broad. She liked the way he looked without his shirt and mask. She liked that she was the only person he allowed to see him this way.

“I feel as if I need to protest that I’m not interested in Madame Vadima. That I’m not *doing*

anything with Madame Vadima. I don’t like the thought of your being angry with me. For some reason, I can’t sleep for thinking about it.”

“I know you aren’t doing anything with her,” she said quietly.

“Do you?”

She nodded.

“You have no reason to be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“If you wish to possess me, rest assured, you do. I am utterly yours.”

This affected her. She made a little noise in the back of her throat. She reached out, as if she would touch him, but then she stopped herself, balling up both of her hands in fists instead. She lay them down in her lap.

“I don’t suppose there’s much use in knowing I’m devoted to you. What would you do with me?

I’m worthless as a man.”

“You’re not… worthless,” she whispered.

“Perhaps if I have some time,” he said. “Maybe someday…”

“Someday what?”

“I want you to take everything off,” he said. “Everything. I want you to show me it all.”

Her insides clenched in a dark and thrilling way.

“You can say no,” he said. “But I don’t wish you to refuse me. Please?”

She pushed the covers aside and climbed out to sit on top of them.

He looked her over, swallowing visibly. “Is that all you’re wearing, just that nightdress?” His

voice was scoured at the edges.

She gave him a small smile and then tugged it over her head and tossed it on the floor. “No,” she

said. “I’m not wearing anything at all.”

He let out a whistling breath, his eyes going half-lidded with desire. His gaze traveled slowly over her, lingering on her breasts.

She could almost feel his eyes on her. Her nipples tightened in response.

His gaze went lower, settling on the place where her legs met her thighs. “I want to see…”

“All right,” she said.

“Lie back,” he rumbled.

She relaxed against her pillow, but she kept her knees tightly pressed together, giving him a little teasing smile. She waited.

He breathed noisily. “Spread your legs.”

She moved her knees apart slowly, revealing herself to him an inch at a time.

He sighed, lips parted, watching her, his expression hungry and eager.

She stopped moving.

“Wider,” he commanded hoarsely.

She smiled, feeling triumphant somehow. She opened herself entirely to him.

He gazed at her with single-minded interest. “You’re so… delicate there. I…” He reached up and

ran his thumb over the outline of his own jaw. “Do you ever touch yourself there?”

“Every time you look at me like this, after you leave me,” she said.

“Truly?” he said, his voice cracking. “On this bed?”

“Mmm.”

“Show me.” He passed this thumb over his bottom lip.

She put one hand on one of her breasts and one hand between her thighs.

His gaze darted back and forth between the two spots, settling between her legs. He watched her

stroke herself.

Her breath quickened as her fingers moved slickly over the center of her pleasure. She shut her

eyes for a minute, and then opened them again, because she liked watching him watch her.

His expression was savage. His breath rattled as it passed through his lips. When she made a noise

of pleasure, he echoed it, seemingly spurred on by her enjoyment of this.

She was loose and slippery but also taut and constricted. Her climax would come on her before

long, and she quickened her fingers in anticipation of it. She made a breathy sound.

He let out a low groan. “You’re building toward something,” he whispered.

“You could touch yourself too,” she said. “If it’s your own hand and not mine—”

“Stop,” he said in a strangled voice. “Don’t ruin this, please?”

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Go quickly again, as you were,” he commanded. “Tell me, how does it feel?”

“Good,” she said, feeling shy.

“Only good?”

“Very good,” she moaned, laughing a little.

“Go on,” he urged.

“Exquisite,” she said. “Like nothing else in the world. Like sweet sparkling wine trapped in a

bottle, ready to gush out all at once."

He grunted, and his body convulsed.

"Did you just—" But she couldn't finish her sentence, because her apex had suddenly overtaken

her, wrapping itself around her, tight and wondrous as it pinned her down and forced itself through her. She tensed—each second deepening the sensation of goodness until it was overwhelming—and

then she let go with a cry, her hips bucking into the bed, her entire body bursting over and over again.

When she opened her eyes, he had pulled his legs onto the bed and he was crouched over her,

balancing on his hands, openly ogling every aspect of her nude skin.

She let out a throaty chuckle, basking in the look he was giving her.

"Scoot over," he said.

"What?" She was confused.

"I want to lie next to you," he said in a low, rich voice. "Give me space."

She scooted, and he tumbled down beside her. He propped himself up on one arm and looked

down at her.

She shot a glance at the crotch of his pants, but it was dark, and she couldn't tell if he'd…

He seemed… different, though. He gave her a smile, and he looked boyish and happy.

She wanted to touch him. She wanted to run her fingers through his hair and trail her touch over his neck and shoulders.

She didn’t.

He laughed. “I shouldn’t feel so proud of myself. All I’ve done here is witness you pleasuring

yourself.”

“Do you feel proud?”

“This is the most satisfying thing I think I’ve ever accomplished.” He arched an eyebrow at her.

She giggled. “Well, I feel quite satisfied as well. I must say, I’ve never quite understood it. It

doesn’t seem as if the act itself is designed for maximizing female pleasure.”

He considered this. “Seems it could be, though, if proper care were taken.”

“Would you take proper care?”

“If I were capable, I would.” He grinned at her.

“I thought you said… with time…?”

“Yes,” he said. “Maybe.” He flopped back on the bed on his back. His shoulder was touching hers,

and he didn’t move it away.

She liked it. It was a tingling touch, their shoulders—their bare skin—against each other. It was

good. “I suppose you don’t touch yourself?”

“No,” he said. “Not in many years. Sometimes I have dreams…” He let out a breath. “It all seems

to function, anyway, even if it terrifies me.”

“It’s not so frightening,” she said.

“How would you know?” he said. “You’ve never seen it.”

“Show me, then.”

He laughed—high-pitched, uncontrolled. “Maybe another time.”

“There will be another time?”

“I hope so,” he said. “I confess, I still wonder how it is that someone like you could want this with someone like me. And if I truly do kill your father, perhaps you’ll decide you want nothing to do with me.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I think my father deserves to die.”

“He does,” he said, sure of this. “That doesn’t mean you’ll thank me for it.”

“Must we talk of this now?”

He turned to look at her. “I’ve had a thought.”

“Just one?”

He chuckled. “It’s been hard to have many more thoughts other than, ‘Naked Ziafiata,’ just recently, I admit. But no, I mean about what we’re trying to accomplish with the caporegimes. They’re

convinced we’re involved.”

She gestured at her bare skin. “I think we *are* involved.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Why hide it? After all, as you say, your father must think that you have seduced me into allowing you to go free. They can think that you have seduced me into doing your bidding.

Once your father is gone, you will appear commanding and alluring. I think this was even your

original plan before I objected to it.”

“You objected because you said you didn’t wish to have to touch me.”

“Perhaps I won’t need to,” he said. “Everyone keeps noticing the way I look at you. Perhaps that

will be enough. Do you think so?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think it might.”

“Good, then,” he said. “We must make it all very public. Your father may suspect you of going

against him and he might hurt you, so we must make sure that everyone in the entire city knows you

are going back to him. I’ll throw you a party here in the tavern, and we’ll invite everyone. At the height of it all, I will make a toast to you, and I’ll say that I will give you anything you wish. You’ll declare you want to be sent home to your father, and I will agree.”

“And then, once I’m back, I will help you get to my father,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “And if… if after all that, if you still wish it, we can continue this, whatever it is.”

“I will wish it,” she said, turning on her side to face him.

He smiled at her. “You are very beautiful, do you know that?”

She smiled back. “You are not so bad to look at yourself, Chevolere.”

“I very much like the way you look without your clothes,” he whispered.

She wanted to kiss him.

She didn’t.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The preparations for the party took on a public air as well. Chevolere took her all over the city,

buying whatever seized her fancy, and making sure to conspicuously ask for her opinion on everything he purchased. Everywhere they went, he commented on how she had changed him, how he could deny

her nothing, how he adored her.

He even brought her to negotiations with pirates, pointedly asking her opinion on how much he

should pay for iubilia.

Word spread quickly that she had Chevolere under her thumb, that he deferred to her in all things.

Everyone wanted an invitation to the party.

The tavern wasn’t large enough, so Chevolere decided to change the venue. He rented the ballroom

at the Magnifica. He brought her there and asked if it would please her, declaring at the top of his lungs that he should find her anyplace that she desired if it did not meet her favor.

She couldn’t say she disliked his little performances. They were playing their own private game

together, and she found it exhilarating.

At night, they were exhausted, and he was up late talking to people about the actual business of

running the tavern, which he still had to see to even as he was planning this lavish party. She found herself falling asleep waiting for him to come up the stairs.

If he did come to visit her room, she slept through it.

One night, however, she resolved to stay awake, and she managed it. Two hours after the tavern

had closed, she heard Chevolere's heavy steps on the stairs, and she went out of her room to greet

him.

He was yawning as she came out of her room. "Ah, you're awake tonight," he said.

"I wanted to stay awake," she said. "I thought we could…" She toyed suggestively with the ties at

the top of her nightdress.

His gaze darkened. "You aren't too tired?"

She shook her head.

He followed her into her room.

Now, that they were here, she felt shy and unsure of what to do. She fiddled with the ties of her

nightdress, trying to find the courage to simply take it off.

He took off his mask. He put it his pocket. He tugged off his tunic and his cape and he folded them and lay them in a pile on the floor.

“I suppose,” she whispered, unable to tear her gaze away from his chest, “I should undress too.”

“Do you…” He put his hands on the laces of his trousers. “Do you still wish to see me?”

“Of course.” She was eager for this.

“Perhaps if we don’t…” The bottom went out of his voice. “Maybe not too much at once?” He

sounded worried. “You keep your clothes on, then.”

“All right.”

He drew in a breath and let it out. He squared his shoulders. Then, without looking at her, he began to fumble with the laces of his breeches. He struggled with them, and she wanted to help, but she

knew that would make things worse for him, so she only waited, biting down on her bottom lip.

Finally, he got them untied and loose. He pushed them down an inch. He inched them down, lower

and lower, and then he stopped, just on the verge of revealing himself. He looked up at her.

She stopped biting her lip. “Are you all right? If you don’t think you can do it, you don’t have to, of course.”

“Would that disappoint you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Answer the question.”

“Maybe a little bit,” she said. “But if you don’t think—” She broke off because he’d just given

another push, and he'd sprung free.

Oh.

She bit down on her lip again.

He was large and thick and so very, very rigid. He was sticking out, pointing straight at her like an arrow.

She made little mewing noise.

He let out a breath.

"I want to touch you," she said, before she could stop herself.

"No," he gasped.

"I know I can't," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I—"

"I like that you want to," he said. "I want to let you. I want it, too. I only…" He made a noise low in his throat, in frustration.

"One thing at a time," she murmured. "Can you touch yourself?"

"I don't know," he said. "Would you…?"

"Do you want me to take off my nightdress?"

"No." He winced. "I mean, yes. But not yet?"

She nodded.

"Could you turn around for a moment?"

"All right." She did.

He made a low, groaning noise. "It's all right," he said. "You can turn back around."

She did.

He had his hand wrapped around his girth, and it was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen in her

entire life. She couldn't stop herself from putting her hands on herself, touching her breasts through her shift.

He let out another groan at that.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "If you want me to stop—"

"I don't." He stroked himself. "Keep your nightdress on, though. Just… rub yourself through it like you're doing. That's very…" He grunted. "Good. Very good."

She was panting. She thrust her hand lower, finding her core.

He was panting too. "I won't last any time at all," he said in strangled voice. "If you need me to

__"

"I don't need anything from you except for you to keep dragging your fist over yourself the way

you're doing," she gasped.

He shuddered. "Blazes, Ziafiata."

"Let yourself go, Chevolere," she breathed. "Let yourself go for me."

He convulsed, throwing back his head, and she watched the way his neck undulated as the pleasure

went through him.

She pinched herself between her legs and tumbled over the edge too, lost to bliss. Something about

watching him fall apart, it was incredibly sensual. She moaned and twitched as pleasure shot through her.

Then they both simply stood there, looking at each other, trying to each catch their breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The party happened on a Friday night, and it was the most talked-of event in all of the Rzymn

underworld. Everyone who had an invitation came and a number of people who did not have

invitations came also. There were three vast rooms in the Magnifica packed with people.

The ballroom was bursting at the seams and the other rooms were soon cleared of sandwiches and

hors d'oeuvres. The wine went quickly too, as did the cocktails. Soon, it was only ale, barrels and barrels of it that were tapped as the music swelled and the people danced.

The party spilled out into the streets of Rzymn, and people toasted the health of Chevolere and

Ziafiata and drank deep as they stared up at the glittering stars.

Scavo cornered Ziafiata to gloat over being right about her and Chevolere.

She smiled, shrugging. "It was his last bit of resistance. He didn't want anyone to know how

thoroughly I possessed him. But eventually, I broke through that too. He is my creature, as you can see. He is mine to do with as I wish."

"I do see," said Scavo. "You are formidable, Ziafiata Abrusse." He clinked his glass of ale against hers.

She was certain that when the time came, Scavo would see her strength. She would take her

father’s place at the head of the Abrusse family. It would all come to pass quite soon.

At midnight, she joined Chevolere on the steps in the midst of the ballroom. They stood on a deep

red carpet that spilled down the stairs and Chevolere clinked a fork against his glass until the

gathered crowed quieted to hear him speak.

“Thank you,” said Chevolere when the silence filled the room. “I wish to address you all here to

sing the praises of this woman, the most excellent woman in all of Rzymn, my own Ziafiata.” He

paused here, pointedly.

Belatedly, the crowd applauded.

Chevolere smiled. “There is nothing that I will not do for this woman, as it is quite plain. Have I spared any expense in this party in your honor?”

“No, indeed,” she said to him. “You have not.”

“Have I not given you everything you have asked for and more?”

“You have, Chevolere, but—”

“But?” He drew himself up. “Aren’t you pleased, my darling? Haven’t I given you everything you

desire?”

“Chevolere,” she said, “I came to live with you when you won me in a card game. You have held

me captive in your tavern for all this time, and a gilded cage is still a cage.”

“What are you saying?”

“Do you love me?”

“Can you doubt it? I worship you.”

“If you love me, set me free,” she said. “Let me return to my father.”

He turned away from her, taking a long drink from his wine glass. He had the only wine left in the

entire party.

Below, everyone watched breathlessly, waiting to see his response.

“I will return to you, my love,” she said. “Don’t you trust me?”

He turned back to her. “Of course I trust you. And of course you are free. Visit your father, then.”

“And my sisters,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Your whole family. You must see them. Tomorrow morning, you will go to them.

They must miss you. But you will return to me?”

“I will,” she said.

“Then it is a promise,” he said. “Let us seal it as such.” He put his hand out, palm up, and she

blinked at him, confused. “Give me your hand, Ziafiata.”

She placed her hand in his.

He gazed into her eyes, his gray eyes flashing. He drew in a breath, and she could see that he

trembled, but she thought no one else could.

What was he doing?

Abruptly, he tugged her close, her body colliding with his chest.

She gasped, surprised at this closeness.

He squeezed her fingers where he still held her hand. His other hand came up to brush her cheek.

Her heart went out of rhythm. She gazed up at him, unsure of what was happening.

“Ziafiata,” he breathed, too quiet for anyone to hear but her.

Carefully, he put his lips on hers.

It was like a gunshot, loud and hot and explosive. Her whole body tightened and she moaned into

his mouth.

He pulled away, and he was shaking.

She put her fingers to her lips.

He managed a smile.

“Oh, Chevolere,” she whispered.

He shook his head at her. “Come now, we must make it look as though we do that all the time.” He

turned back to the crowd, who were all cheering.

She beamed out at them.

Chevolere raised his glass. “Music!” he roared. “Dancing!”

More cheers.

The music came up, swelling as he pulled her down the stairs and onto the dance floor.

* * *

They did not make it back to the tavern until quite late. Dawn was only an hour off, and Ziafiata

thought she’d had a bit too much to drink. Perhaps Chevolere had too. They were stumbling as they

climbed the stairs.

At the top, she paused before going into her room. “I suppose I should rest before I go to my

father.”

“Yes.” He nodded, reaching back to untie his mask. “You’ll need your rest.”

She turned to look at her door, which was slightly open. She could see the room where she’d slept

for all these weeks. She turned back to him. “I wasn’t expecting the kiss.”

He laughed. “I didn’t think I’d be able to pull it off, so I didn’t say anything.”

“But you did,” she said.

He shrugged, looking helpless. “I did.”

She took a step toward him. “Do you think… could we do it again?”

“Oh, Ziafiata.” He shook his head.

“No?”

“I…”

“But no one is here,” she said. “It’s just us. And was it so very terrible to kiss me?”

“It was not terrible at all.”

“So?”

He dragged a hand over his face. “Oh, my sweet, beautiful…”

She licked her lips.

“Come here,” he said, his voice very deep and very determined.

She stepped closer.

He seized her hand as he had done before and pulled her against him.

She searched his gaze with her own.

He furrowed his brow as he looked her over. He seemed to be concentrating very hard. He lifted a

hand and he let it hover next to her face.

Her pulse started to thrum beneath her skin.

His fingers darted in to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She gasped at his touch.

He let his fingers linger, tracing shivery lines over her jaw and cheekbone.

She lifted her lips, offering them to him.

He traced the outline of them with his forefinger.

She shut her eyes.

His breath was hot against her face. His lips pressed into her forehead. “I can’t, Ziafiata,” he

murmured in a trembling voice. “I’m sorry, but it’s too much.” He let go of her, taking a step back.

She opened her eyes, reaching out for him.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Do you… do you think of her when we touch? Of your sister and what happened to her?”

“No,” he said. “No, I only think of you.”

“Then…” She shifted on her feet. “Why is it too much?”

“You overwhelm me. You make me out of control.”

“You make me feel that way too.”

“It frightens me.”

She shrugged. “I suppose it frightens me too.”

“No, it frightens me that I’ll…”

She waited.

He never finished.

“That you’ll what?”

He took his mask from his pocket and unfolded it. Then he folded it again. “When you first came to

me, and I was threatening you, terrorizing you, I… blazes, Ziafiata, some part of me enjoyed it.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

He crushed the mask in his fist. “I would *know*, wouldn’t I?”

“You enjoyed it when I was afraid of you?”

“I was aroused, wasn’t I? You felt how hard I was.”

“That’s not the same thing,” she said. “I wasn’t wearing any clothes. I think any man—and a lot of

women too—would be unable to control their physical reaction to nudity. It’s rather just the way a

human body functions—”

“Stop,” he growled.

She stopped.

He shoved the mask back in his pocket. “If I let myself get too overwhelmed, what if it takes me

over, and I do something awful to you?”

“You wouldn’t,” she said.

“But what if I did?”

“Then I would slit your throat just like I did Diago’s.” Her nostrils flared.

His eyes widened at her tone, at her fierceness.

“You know, Chevolere, never mind it all. I *am* tired.” She stalked into her room, shutting herself inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

She woke only after a few hours sleep, tired but too agitated to sleep any longer. She didn’t expect to find Chevolere awake, but he was down in the tavern as the workers mopped the floors and bustled about in the kitchen. He sat at a table with a cup of coffee. When he saw her, he got to his feet.

She went to him. Should she say anything about what had happened last night, or rather this

morning? What would she say?

“You don’t have to do this,” said Chevolere.

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“I wish to release you from any arrangement we have made between us. I don’t need you to be part

of my revenge on your father. I don’t feel as though it’s right to ask it of you.”

“But how will you manage it without me?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think you may be not be… be pleased when it is done, however. I

would spare you the confusion of feeling responsible for it at all. If you need to, you may hate me, but I don’t wish for you to ever hate yourself. I couldn’t bear doing that to you.”

“I don’t think you will be able to manage it without me.”

“It may take some time,” he said, “but I don’t mind waiting. I have waited a long time. I shall wait just a bit longer.”

“No,” she said. “I bargained with you. I promised to help.”

“I know, but you don’t have to,” he said.

“It won’t hurt me,” she said. “I hate him.”

“Do you?” said Chevolere. “Do you truly?”

“*He* hates *me*,” she said. “He’s not capable of love.”

“That’s as it may be,” said Chevolere. “But even if he hates you, that doesn’t mean you don’t still love him. Even if he doesn’t deserve it.”

“I don’t love him.” She waved this way. “That’s preposterous. Besides, if you couldn’t do it, you’d be frustrated, and you’d only grow to resent me in time. You have wanted this revenge for a very long time. I want him gone, Chevolere. I *do*.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am,” she said. “Besides, I have to go and see him anyway, after our little performance last night.

I’m sure he’s heard all about it by now.”

“You could simply visit your family, you know,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be anything else.”

“I have no desire to visit him,” she said. “If I’m going, it’s only to assist you.”

He nodded slowly. “Well, all right, then.”

“Have you been up all night?” She eyed him. He was still wearing his clothes from the party.

“No, I slept,” he said ruefully. “I simply didn’t undress. It seemed… well, I didn’t want to.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should never have pushed you last night.”

“Yes, I’m quite fragile.” One side of his mouth tugged upwards in half a smile. “You’re quite a bit stronger than I am.”

“You aren’t fragile.” She reached up, to touch him reassuringly, and remembered to stop at just the last minute.

He grimaced, looking at his feet.

She slowly lowered her hand. “Well, I’d best get ready to go home.” She looked about the room.

“Where did you get that coffee?”

“Ziafiata?”

She turned back to him.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course,” she said briskly. “It’s nothing, Chevolere.”

“It isn’t nothing,” he said. “I want you to know I recognize that.” He gazed at her with such a look in his eyes that she couldn’t bear it. She had to look away.

* * *

Her father did not meet her at the door but called out for her when she came back to his house. It

was noon by then, but that was the earliest she could have made it home.

She stepped into the dining room, where her father was using a fork to pick at a roasted fish. The

bones rose up on his plate, along with the skin, which he had peeled off. “So, you’ve come back.”

“Yes,” she said. “I discovered that Chevolere isn’t so horrible after all. He’s actually quite good and kind deep down, and he let me come back to you.”

Her father snorted. “I also hear tell rumors you have been meeting with my caporegimes and trying

to sell them iubilia.”

“What?” she said. “No, Father.” She shook her head. Of course, she’d known such things might get

back to him. “How would I know how to negotiate with men like that? Why, I couldn’t even work the

sums.”

He looked her over, head to toe.

“What seems more likely, Father? That in my time with Chevolere, he brought out my ruthlessness

and made me like him, or that I was kind and good to him and brought out his own goodness?”

Her father put a forkful of fish in his mouth and chewed.

“I must go back to him, of course,” she said. “But I hoped that we could invite Gabrielle and

Suzanne and their husbands for dinner, perhaps tomorrow? I would like to see everyone again. I have missed you all so dearly.”

“You couldn’t even conceive of trying to harm the family, could you, little Zia? There’s not a mean bone in your body.”

“There really isn’t,” she said.

He chuckled. “Well, of course we’ll dine with your sisters. See to the arrangements, will you?”

“Of course.” Because when a long lost daughter comes home, she must plan her own reunion

dinner in the Abrusse household. She wanted to snort, but she held it in. “Oh, Father, it is so good to see you again. It is so good to be home.”

Her father grunted and went back to his fish.

She backed out of the dining room. She didn’t make any plans for a dinner. Her father would be

dead by tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Chevolere felt anxious all day.

He could not concentrate on anything, and he spent the day poking his nose into various aspects of

the tavern here and there until everyone who worked there had dismissed him in exasperation,

assuring him they had their tasks under control.

Sunset came.

Chevolere wanted to have a drink to calm his nerves, but he didn’t want to be anything other than

clear-headed for the evening’s activities, so he didn’t drink anything, not even more coffee, which he had considered, since he wasn’t planning on going to sleep for some time.

But sometimes coffee made his fingers shake, and he couldn’t afford that happening either.

It was odd because there had been a time when all he did was fantasize about killing Federo

Abrusse, and he had imagined doing it in all manner of ways. Slow, fast, bloody, clean…

Now, it was going to happen, and it was going to be simple. Just his dagger.

He was debating about even waking the man up.

Maybe he didn’t need to do that.

He had no illusions that he’d get some admission of guilt from Federo, some declaration of regret.

No, Federo was not that way. If he had been, he wouldn’t have been the sort of man who would lose

his daughter in a game of cards.

It was easier if it happened in his sleep, and there was less likelihood of anything going wrong.

Furthermore, it might be better for Ziafiata if her father didn’t suffer.

Yes, he was almost entirely sure that was the way he would do it.

He would simply remove Federo Abrusse from the world with one quick strike, possibly to the

back of his head, burying the knife in just under the man’s skull.

When he thought of it, some part of him shrank from it, and he didn’t know why that would be. He

thought nothing of killing. In the beginning, perhaps it had bothered him, but not in years had he been the least bit troubled.

He thought some hidden part of him might have been uncovered by Ziafiata. Perhaps, when he'd

removed his mask for her—his clothing—he had taken off more than leather and fabric. Maybe he'd

removed something else, something more vital, and maybe there was some vulnerable, pink part of

him that had been exposed.

He should despise that, but he didn't.

Being with her, seeing her, kissing her… it was possibly the only truly good thing he'd experienced in his adult life.

And now, he was setting off to murder her father.

Somehow, it felt wrong to him.

Even still, at the appointed time, he set off through the city for her father's house. He wore a cloak with a hood, and he walked with it pulled over his face so that none could see his mask and recognize him. It was perhaps a bit funny that the very thing he'd put on to obscure his identity now was the most identifiable thing about him. He considered not wearing the mask at all, but the idea of killing Federo without it was too much for him. No, he *needed* the mask.

When he arrived at the servants' entrance in the back, where he'd been instructed to enter, Ziafiata was waiting for him there. She was dressed in a purple gown he'd never seen before. It was modest,

high in the front, with long bell-shaped sleeves. She had pulled her hair into a tight bun on the top of her head. It almost put him in mind of Madame Vadima. He reached for her when he got there,

somehow wanting her touch as comfort—even though they didn’t do that.

She shied from him.

He flinched. *Don’t do it*, he urged himself. *Tell her anything. Tell her you’ve lost your nerve. Tell her you’re squeamish. But don’t.*

“He’s not asleep,” she said.

Chevolere drew himself up.

“He went to bed only a quarter hour ago. He has not even extinguished the light in his room,” she

said.

Chevolere opened his mouth to tell her that this was a sign, and that they should abandon the plan

entirely. But what came out was, “Take me to him.”

“Are you certain?” she said. “If you cannot surprise him in his sleep—”

“I’m sure.” His voice was hard. Something like molten steel was rising up in him, and it was

sealing its way around any vulnerable parts that had been exposed. This was his revenge. This had

been planned for years. He could never abandon it.

She drew in a breath. “All right.” A long pause. She didn’t look at him. Then she gestured. “This

way.”

Wordlessly, she led him through the house, and he said nothing either. Now, he was filled with

fiery resolve, and it felt like scalding pleasure, a searing bit of perfection that he could not deny.

When they came to the closed door, the light of the lamp spilling out from underneath, he drew in a breath, savoring this moment, hot all over.

“Chevolere,” said Ziafiata in a small voice.

He didn’t even look at her. He looked at the door. “Yes?” He reached out and touched the knob, a

caress.

“I have been thinking about what you said.”

“Mmm.” He was a string being pulled taut.

“About how I didn’t need to help you with your revenge?”

He glanced at her then. “Do you want me to stop?” *Don’t tell me to stop*, he begged her. Moments ago, he could have, but not now, not when he was so close. He had to have this.

She hesitated.

“Ziafiata?” he prompted.

She only shook her head.

He took this to mean that she didn’t want him to stop and turned the door knob. The door opened,

and he stepped inside Federo’s bedchamber.

Federo was sitting at a desk clad only in an untucked shirt and his breeches. He was on his feet

immediately when the door opened. “Chevolere.”

Chevolere crossed the room in three long strides. He wrapped one hand around Federo's neck.

With the other hand, he reached back and untied the mask. Now, he understood that he *had* to take it off. "You likely don't remember me, Federo."

"You're that brat who had that dead whore of a sister," said Federo.

Chevolere clenched his teeth.

"When I knew you had some kind of grievance with me, I started thinking back. I came up with half

a dozen possible contenders. But it's you. The sobbing, red-nosed boy I threw into the street." Federo laughed. "Well, what are you planning on doing now?"

Chevolere tightened his hold on Federo's neck.

The man coughed. He raised his voice. "Ziafiata! Come and see how truly kind and good your

Chevolere really is. He has used you, just as that Caputio devil did."

Ziafiata stepped into the room. "He didn't use me, Father. Who do you think let him into the

house?"

Federo's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that. He turned back to Chevolere. "What did you do

to her? What did you do to my sweet little girl?"

Chevolere forced Federo back, bending him backwards over the desk.

The man cried out at the unnatural angle of it.

Chevolere got out his dagger and held it under the old man's chin. He glared into Federo's eyes.

"What do you *think* I did to her?"

"You're a monster," said Federo. "She was innocent. You…" His voice shook. "How is hurting my

daughter any better than what happened to your sister? I never even *touched* her."

"Are you sorry for what you did to my sister?" said Chevolere.

Federo wrapped both hands around Chevolere's wrist, trying to pull him off.

Chevolere pushed the tip of the dagger into Federo's neck, drawing a small bit of blood. "Are

you?"

"Yes, *yes*," gasped Federo. "Truly, I had no notion they would be quite so savage with her. I had never seen men do such things to a virgin. If I had known…"

"You wouldn't have sold her?"

"No," said Federo.

Chevolere scoffed. He punched the tip of his dagger in again.

Federo let out a hoarse cry.

"Chovelere?" It was Ziafiata's voice.

"Perhaps you shouldn't watch this." He didn't take his eyes off her father.

"Tell him the truth. I don't want you to lie to him about us," said Ziafiata.

“Does it matter?” said Chevolere.

“He has never had me, Father,” said Ziafiata. “It’s not like that.”

Federo glanced at his daughter over Chevolere’s shoulder. “Why did you deliver me to him, then?

It’s because of what I did to your mother, isn’t it?”

Ziafiata’s voice wasn’t strong. “There are many, many reasons, Father. Many, many things you have

done to me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Federo. “I don’t mean to be the way I am sometimes, truly. I… the rage just

comes over me. After it’s over, I’m never even sure where it came from or what raging beast it was

that occupied me. If I were myself, I would never have—”

“Shut up,” said Chevolere. “You don’t get to make excuses.”

Federo turned back to Chevolere. “We can settle this. I have money.”

“I don’t need your money.”

“I have status and reputation in this town. I can give you—”

“Your daughter will head the family after you’re gone, and she and I have already negotiated

arrangements,” said Chevolere.

Federo was astonished. “Y-you schemed *against* me, Zia?”

“Chevolere,” said Ziafiata in a tight voice.

“I think you should go,” said Chevolere. “Leave the room, Ziafiata.” Then, to Federo. “And you,

old man, no more talking. Our business is at an end.”

“No!” Ziafiata’s voice broke. “No, I don’t want you to do it, Chevolere. I… I find you’re right. I

don’t wish to be part of this. In fact, I don’t wish you to do it at all. Why do you need to kill him?

Can’t you… can’t you spare him? For my sake?”

Chevolere turned away from Federo and gaped at her. “Ziafiata, I…” He turned back to the old

man. It was a flick of his wrist to cut the man’s throat. It could be over in seconds. He wanted it.

Blazes, he wanted it. It would be right and good and it would fulfill him. He couldn’t stop, not now, not when Federo was broken and begging in his grasp.

Ziafiata let out a sob.

Federo’s breath was so loud that it seemed to echo against the ceiling of the room. He was bent

backwards, cringing in pain, gazing up at Chevolere, completely at his mercy.

Chevolere let go of him. “Blaze everything,” he muttered. He pulled back the dagger and stalked

out of the room. Outside, he shut the door on them both and put his back against it. He gazed up at the ceiling, and inside him, there was a surge of heat and rage and pain.

And then, like an ocean wave, it broke and spattered him with its foam before it ebbed back out,

leaving him calm and quiet. He bowed his head.

He opened the door again.

Ziafiata was there, as if she had been about to come after him. “We’ll take it from him, anyway,”

she said. “I have the respect of the caporegimes. I have you and your connections. I’ll take the family from him, and he’ll be nothing. He’ll be no one. It’ll still be revenge. It’ll be better revenge. He’ll suffer for longer, and you’ll see that—”

He kissed her.

Her voice died as his tongue found hers. She threw her arms around him, molding her body against

his, and he put his hand on her back and crushed her against him. She was soft and warm and her

touch was everything.

He had done it. He had faced the darkest part of himself, the part that craved violence and

delighted in blood, and he’d stepped back from it. He had given up what he wanted most for her. He

was no longer afraid of himself. He was no longer frightened of touching her.

She pulled back, gasping, looking at him with a stunned expression on her face. Then she kissed

him again.

They might have gone on kissing, but Federo was there, hand against his throat, which was

trickling blood. He had a pistol in one hand, and he was waving it at them both. “Ziafiata, move out of the way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ziafiata turned, her body between Chevolere’s and her father’s. She had never seen her father have

a weapon like that before. “What are you doing with that? You’re not a musqueteer.”

“I keep one for emergencies,” said Federo, whose hands were busy with a ramrod, jamming a ball

down the pistol’s barrel. “This blackguard corrupting my daughter seems emergency enough.”

“No, Father,” said Ziafiata. “I can’t let you hurt Chevolere.” She stepped backward, pushing him

back, toward the stairs. They were just down the hallway, only a few steps away. Chevolere could

hurry down them, and she would go after him and they would figure out the next step in the plan.

She wasn’t sentimental, and she didn’t want her father alive for his own sake, but she thought that Chevolere may have been right earlier when he’d told her that she could love her father even if he

didn’t love her. It would wound her to know she had killed him. She couldn’t go that far. It was too much even for her.

Chevolere’s hands were on her hips, and she was still stunned at how easily he was touching her,

how casually, as if he did it all the time. He spoke, his voice low at her ear. “I won’t use you as a human shield, love.”

Love? She looked up at him, her insides turning over. She wanted to kiss him again. It was

frightfully inconvenient that her father had decided to kill him at this exact moment. She turned back to her father. “Put the gun down, Father. You’re not shooting Chevolere. He let you live, and you should be grateful for that. We’re both going to go down the stairs and then—”

“Stop talking, Zia,” said her father. “This is between the Beast and myself.”

Chevolere stepped out from behind Ziafiata, facing Federo. “It’s true I did come here with the plan of stabbing you to death while you slept, so I suppose it would be hypocritical for me to call out the dishonor of shooting a man who has no means of defending himself against a bullet.”

Ziafiata leaped back in front of him, glaring at him. “Are you positively insane?”

“Let the men handle this, Zia,” said her father.

Ziafiata stalked over to her father and seized the barrel of the pistol. She tried to wrench it out of the man’s hands, but he was stronger than her, and he pulled back on it.

The gun went off, the barrel pointing at the ceiling.

It pierced the plaster above, and white chunks rained down on them all.

“Let’s go, Chevolere,” said Ziafiata, taking him by the hand and yanking him toward the steps.

“Blazes,” muttered Federo, fumbling in his pockets for another bullet, for more powder. He’d have

to ram them down again to reload the gun.

Chevolere didn’t fight her and they began to descend the steps.

“Get back here and face me like a man, Chevolere!” called Federo.

Ziafiata looked back up to see that he was coming after them, but he was working on loading the

gun at the same time. He barely paused to pour in the powder, and some spilled on the floor.

Federo took another step, but he didn’t seem to realize that the stairs started, and he slipped.

His arms cartwheeled in the air, and the gun fell, slamming down against the steps, but not

exploding again, due to not having been packed properly.

He pitched forward, letting out a hoarse cry.

He slammed face first into the stairs and then his legs toppled over his head and then he was still.

Ziafiata halted.

Chevolere stopped behind her as well.

They both stared at Federo, waiting for him to move.

He didn’t.

Chevolere put a hand on her arm. “Stay here.” He quickly climbed the steps and knelt next to

Federo.

There was blood. A great deal of blood was pouring out of her father’s head. Rivers of blood. She

made a tiny noise in the back of her throat.

Chevolere's hand was on Federo's neck.

"He's dead, isn't he?" she called out. Her voice was steadier than she thought it would have been.

Chevolere looked up at her, lifting his fingers, which were stained with her father's blood. "I'm

sorry, Ziafiata."

She drew in a breath, shaking her head.

* * *

"Is it better this way?" Ziafiata whispered against Chevolere's chest. They were lying in his bed,

both dressed in their nightclothes, having washed and changed upon getting back to the tavern. "Or is it only pointless? If I had known, I would have simply let you kill him."

Dawn was not far off. They had spent hours at the Abrusse home, dealing with the dead body,

calling in an undertaker to take his remains off for burial, and making various arrangements. Ziafiata knew she would have to tell her sisters what had happened—it was odd, that was something she had

never considered when she agreed to allow Chevolere to murder her father—but Chevolere had told

her that she could face that after some sleep.

"You think it's better?" said Chevolere, arms wrapped tightly around her. "But he's gone."

“I don’t care about him being dead,” she said. “That’s not why I agreed to let you do it. I think the world is better off without him. I just couldn’t bear having been the one who took him out of it. So, yes, I suppose it’s better for me. It’s as if everything worked out, and now I have no responsibility in it. It was an accident, and he essentially did it to himself. But you were denied your revenge. I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m not,” he said. “I think if I had killed him, you would have never looked at me the same way. It would have destroyed this between us, and you are the most important thing in the world to me.”

She let out a funny noise in the back of her throat. “You keep saying these *things*…”

“What other things have I said? You don’t approve of being my most important thing? Does it

frighten you?”

“You called me ‘love,’” she said.

“Ah, I did, didn’t I?” He pressed his lips to the place where her hair met her forehead. “Well, I

suppose I said it because I’m in love with you.”

She gasped. “Chevolere!”

He loosened his grip. “I’m beginning to feel as if these emotions from me are unwelcome. Would

you rather return to your own bed?” His voice was teasing.

But when she looked at him, she could see that there was true vulnerability in his expression.

“Don’t be silly. Of course I’m in love with you, too.”

“Oh, of course.” He blinked. “But you sounded scolding just then. I could swear you did not

approve of my having said it.”

“It’s not a very romantic time is all,” she said.

“Ah,” he said. “My apologies. We can pretend I haven’t said it, and I’ll try again some other time, when we’re dining on oysters and sipping red wine from fine crystal goblets. Would that be better?”

“No,” she sighed. “Maybe it *is* a romantic time.”

“I think it is,” he said. “I gave up the thing that drove me, that made me who I was, that informed my every decision, the thing I’ve been *living for* all these years… I gave that up for *you*. That’s rather romantic, isn’t it?”

“Oh, only a man would think that.” She shook her head.

He stroked her hair. “I’m very sorry. There’s simply no pleasing you, is there?” He was amused.

“And why are you suddenly so comfortable with touching me? Just yesterday, you couldn’t bear to

kiss me, and now we’re… every part of my body is pressed into yours.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled. “Yes, that’s quite nice, isn’t it?”

“Why?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I feel as if I went through a severe test, as if I came to the very crux of my own internal struggle, and I realized that I was worried for nothing. Given the choice between doing something I wanted very badly that would also hurt you, and doing what *you* wanted, I would choose you. So, I no longer think I will lose control and ravage you. That was actually a very silly thing to think.”

“I *told* you it was a silly thing to think.”

“Yes, well, you’re rather superior to me in every way, Ziafiata,” he said.

She ran her fingers over his cheekbone. “It’s good you recognize that. Things will go smoothly

between us as long as you keep that attitude.”

He chuckled. He turned his head to kiss her fingers. “Sleep, love. You need to rest.”

“So do you,” she breathed. She scooted up to press her lips against his. When she kissed him, it

was like coming home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

They didn’t wake until afternoon the next day. Ziafiata woke first, and she lay in the circle of

Chevolere’s arms and marveled at the idea of it, of having shared his bed, at being close to him. She squirmed against him, snuggling in close, and tried not to think of everything that was ahead of her.

Her father was gone.

She would need to make a strong bid for his position. She would need to secure the caporegimes

immediately. She decided that she would declare herself street queen and issue orders. Anyone who

didn’t follow the orders would have to be taken care of. Personally, by her. Nothing else would show her strength besides illustrating her own ruthlessness and her willingness to get her hands bloody.

She’d need to issue the first order by sundown, because there might be others who would be

attempting to take control of the family, and she could not give them a chance to do so.

She would need her own headquarters, and it couldn't be Chevolere's tavern. Her father owned a

great number of businesses in town. There was even an inn just across the street from here. It would work. That way, she and Chevolere could be close, and if she did spend every night here in his bed, it would only be a short walk there to start her day and conduct her own business.

She needed Chevolere, but she could not rely on him. However, she supposed she didn't care if

everyone knew about their relationship. They had kissed very publicly anyway. They all thought that she was leading him about by the cock.

Over time, they could ease the public perception, so that he could be seen as a partner, not as

subservient, but for now, it would serve her well.

Oh, but before she did any of this, she would need to visit both of her sisters and give them the

news about their father. She wasn't looking forward to that, but—

"What are you thinking about?" Chevolere's voice was sleep-ravaged and very deep, and it made

her insides get tangled up.

She was sitting up, propped against the headboard of the bed, and she looked down at him on the

pillow, his chest bare, his face uncovered, and she gave him a breathless smile. "Good morning."

He pushed himself up next to her, smiling at her lazily. “You looked as though you were

concentrating.”

“I was making plans,” she said. “There are many things I have to see to today.”

“I suppose that’s true,” he said. “You will be a street queen now, and you will be frightfully busy.

Will I even see you at all?”

“Yes.” Her smile widened. “Yes, I want us to see each other. Lots of each other.”

“All of each other?” He glanced at her nightdress meaningfully.

There was a wash of warmth between her thighs. “Oh… do you want… to see me?” Her voice

dropped at the end of the sentence, the bottom going out of it.

“I do,” he said. “But if you’re very busy with your plans, and if you don’t think now is a good time, I suppose it could wait.”

“It’s waited far too long as it is,” she said, sitting up. She gathered handfuls of her nightdress and tugged it off, baring her body. “You too, then. Take everything off. If you can touch me, and we can kiss and sleep in the same bed, we can make love, then? Yes?”

Chevolere didn’t say anything. He gazed at her, reaching up to absently scratch his chin, which

needed shaving. His lips were parted.

“Chevolere?” she prompted.

“Hmm?” He blinked, and then refocused on her face. “Oh, yes, you were saying? I find it hard to

concentrate when I’m looking at your breasts. Have I told you how much I like looking at them? I

don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more perfect and round and lovely.”

She flushed a bit in spite of herself. “Do you want to touch them?”

“Yes,” he said. “Very much.” He reached for her.

“Wait,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. “I thought that was an invitation.”

“I am wearing nothing, and you are still frustratingly clothed.” She pointed at his trousers. “Off.

Now.”

“You’re going to be a very demanding street queen, aren’t you?” He unlaced his trousers and

wriggled out of them.

She bit down hard on her lip at the sight of him uncovered. He was standing up straight, thick and

rigid, and pointing at the ceiling, and this time, she didn’t check her urge to touch him.

He gasped as she wrapped her hand around him. “I thought… that’s not fair.” His voice was

labored.

“Is it all right?” She hesitated.

“It’s… how am I supposed to have any presence of mind to touch your breasts when you’re doing

that?” His chest rose and fell visibly. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting to touch you, Ziafiata?”

“Well,” she said, stroking him, “I have been waiting a rather long time, too, and I like everything about touching you here. I don’t see how it can be so hard and satiny all at the same time. It’s my favorite part of your body, and I’m not letting go of it.”

He shut his eyes, emitting a helpless laugh, and sank down into his pillow. “Very well, then. I know better than to try to cross you when you are determined in this way.”

“That is as it should be,” she said, mesmerized by watching him appear and disappear into her fist.

“One thing, however, I might point out.” His eyes were still closed. He was out of breath.

“What’s that?”

“Well, you had mentioned something about making love?”

“Yes,” she said. “You agreed to it.”

“If you keep doing that, I’ll simply explode in your hand, and there will be nothing left to make

love with. Especially if you tell me that it’s your favorite part of my body again.” His voice was

guttural.

She slowed her movement. “Hmm. I see your point.”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.” She let go of him and climbed over him, planting her hands on either side

of his shoulders and straddling him.

He opened his eyes when she settled there. The tip of him brushed her belly. A slow, lazy smile

slid across his face. “I like this very much. You should *always* be in this position.”

She giggled. “I like it, too.”

He drew in a breath and lifted his hands. Then he gathered both of her breasts up. Gently, very

gently.

Her giggle faded into a sigh at his touch.

He stroked her and then cupped her and then his thumbs found her nipples, which he carefully

brushed back and forth.

She moaned as sweet points of goodness traveled through her, lighting her up. She wriggled her

pelvis against him.

He moaned too, gazing at her with his eyes barely open. “Your skin is incredibly soft.”

She drew in an audible breath at that. His words made her feel a surge of pleasure.

He closed his thumb and forefinger around her now-hard nipples, but he was very gentle as he

barely plucked them. “You’re softer than satin, Ziafiata. You’re… I couldn’t have imagined it would be like this to touch you.”

She couldn’t stop herself from kissing him.

He kissed back eagerly.

They kissed for a long time, and his hands kept squirming between their bodies to tease her in her

most sensitive spots. He explored her thoroughly, all over, and she felt lost to it all.

At some point, she couldn’t say when, he flipped them over, and then she was trapped beneath him

in the most pleasant of ways, and his hips started to move against hers, and she wrapped her legs

around him, and they kept kissing.

She explored his back and the roundness of his backside.

He put his mouth on her breasts.

She arched her back against the waves of pleasure that began to assail her, from his fingers and

mouth and body.

And when he somehow slipped inside her, it was a kind of accident, and it only happened because

she was so very slippery and wet between her legs.

He broke their kiss when he felt it, eyes wide.

She giggled, because he looked so surprised.

“I didn’t… I wasn’t trying…” He laughed too. “Is it all right?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “More than all right.” So, *this* was what it was supposed to feel like, then?

She was supposed to be teased and swollen and sensitive, and he was supposed to stretch her and fill her and stimulate her from the inside out. She let out a noise that was almost a whimper.

He kissed her eyebrow. He groaned. “You feel… *good*.”

She laughed. “You feel like…”

He made an experimental thrust.

“Springtime,” she decided.

He laughed. He kissed her nose. “Springtime?” Had his voice ever been that deep before?

“Maybe summer,” she said. “Maybe a midnight summer thunderstorm.”

“How are you thinking all these words?” he gasped. He was moving more quickly against her, and

her hips were rising to move with him, seemingly of their own volition.

Every thrust they made together was a new sensation, another layer of goodness that she’d never

felt before. He was battering her in the best of ways. He was invading her, but she liked it, oh blazes, she liked it. It was everything.

He wasn’t the thunderstorm, she was. The storm was inside her, and it was brewing, lightning

leaping through her pelvis, storm clouds heavy and ready to erupt.

She clutched at the sheets on the bed. She threw back her head, her mouth open in silent scream.

She bowed up, her entire body, tense with the promise of it.

He kissed her neck. He kissed her between her breasts. He was holding onto hips, holding her still, working his way in her, and it was perfect.

She burst.

He grunted. He pierced her, deep—so deep—so very deep… He convulsed against her.

And then they were kissing again, tangled together, the aftershocks of the storm working their way

through both of their bodies, and she clutched him closer, closer, closer.

She panted.

He groaned.

They were still.

For a very long time, they didn't move, simply lying there, their bodies connected, their skin

melded together.

Eventually, he lifted his head. He brushed her hair away from her face. "Hello there," he

whispered.

"Hello," she whispered back.

"Was that what you had in mind when you asked me to make love to you?" he said. "Because if not,

I’m willing to keep practicing. I’m sure I could perfect my technique with work.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, smiling. “I don’t think you need much improvement. But I’m

willing to try if you are.”

“Oh, thank you,” he said, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder. “I appreciate that. Because, you know, I am prepared not to touch a hair on your head.”

She smirked. “Too late.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “There does seem to be a lot of touching happening at the moment.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am,” he said, lifting his head to look at her. “I’m… I’ve never felt quite this good in my

entire life.”

“Me either,” she murmured, tangling her fingers in his hair.

“I love you,” he said, gazing into her eyes.

“I love you, too,” she said, and it was a litany, a promise.

Their lips met again, and they kissed slowly and deliberately for some time. Eventually, he pulled

away and rested his forehead against her shoulder.

“I suppose you would like me to move,” he said. “I know you have quite a lot of things to see to

today. I’m in your way, I imagine.”

“You are,” she said. “And I do have a lot of things to see to. I have a street empire to build after all. But don’t move.”

“No?”

“Not just yet.”

* * *

Thanks for reading!

Not ready to leave Rzymn and the surrounding countries?

Scroll down for an excerpt from *King Breaker,* which tells the story of Fleur of Islaigne and Remy Toussaint, who had a brief cameo in this book.

Get a copy here.

* * *

The prince was sitting in a chair that looked too small for him. Truly, he had grown quite a bit in the past four years. He was enormous. Folded into that small chair, I was aware of just how thick his forearms were, just how long his legs were.

It would have been intimidating if he weren’t sulking. He looked especially like a petulant boy-

man, and he disgusted me.

We were in the antechamber of his quarters. He’d wanted to go to my room, but I’d refused him

entrance.

In retaliation, he had refused to allow me into to the sitting room of his quarters, so we were here in this antechamber, which had the one, small chair for his valet to use. Next to the door there were hooks and shelves

that contained his shoes and cloaks. He had, of course, taken the only chair in the room to be difficult.

Now, he eyed me with disgust.

I wished Guillame was here, but I had no idea where he had gone. I'd had to pretend that I wasn't

with him at all, so I hadn't even cast a glance into the shadows where he was hiding, but simply

strode right past him.

I didn't need Guillame, of course.

I folded my arms over my chest.

The prince's expression changed, looking amused, looking smug, and I realized that he was looking

through my sheer dress, and that folding my arms over my chest had pulled the fabric taut, making my body more visible to him.

Furious, I dropped my hands. I had the urge to hide, to pull myself in, curl into a ball, but I couldn't do that. That would be weak. Instead, I took a deep breath and gave him a level gaze.

"I'm waiting," he said.

"What?" I said.

"You're the one who wants something," he said. "What is it you want? How do I buy your silence

about Coralie and me?" Coralie was the queen.

What *did* I want? "I want to go home to Islaigne. I want our marriage annulled and a ship and a crew and provisions."

He gazed at me, expressionless. He had a penetrating gaze. It made me uncomfortable.

But I gazed back, refusing to be intimidated by him.

The prince ran a hand through his hair. “Interesting.”

I gritted my teeth. I had the sudden urge to rush across the room and dig my fingernails into some

soft part of his skin. I didn’t think I’d ever hated anyone the way I hated this man. But partly I hated myself. Because by telling him what I wanted, I had laid myself bare. Telling him what I wanted, it made me feel vulnerable in some way. Maybe if I’d talked this over with Guillame, maybe then we

could have figured out a way to ask for it without making me seem so desperate.

“I would like to go to Islaigne too,” said the prince in a very low voice. It reverberated, a rich

bass that seemed to fill the room.

“What?” I said. I hadn’t expected that response. I’d expected him to tell me that Islaigne was

destroyed and it was too dangerous to go back, and that the way there was blocked by living flame, so it was impossible.

He leaned forward, resting an elbow on his knee. He propped his cheek against his palm. “All

right, what if we stayed married for the time being?”

“Why?” I said.

“Because I can’t get you a ship and a crew and provisions. That’s an expenditure that my brother

would have to approve, and he never would. Also, I can’t get our marriage annulled for the same

reason.”

“Your brother?”

“He values the alliance the marriage secures,” said the prince.

“So, you’re useless to me, that’s what you’re saying.”

He chuckled, and the sound was ironic and yet somehow gentle. “I hate my brother,” he said

conversationally.

“Well, I’m told that’s common amongst siblings, but I wouldn’t know, considering I never had

any.”

“I don’t mean that kind of hate,” he said mildly. “I mean that I loathe him more than I’ve ever

loathed anything on earth, and my deepest wish is to do him harm, to make him suffer, and then to kill him.” There was as much inflection in his voice as there might be if we were discussing the weather.

I didn’t say anything. I schooled myself not to react, even though I was developing a certain…

respect for the prince, even as my dislike for him deepened. He truly was a wretched, wretched

person with no redeeming qualities. But the way he seemed so unaffected by the prospect of violence, I envied that. I wanted to be as hard and cold as he was. It was the only way forward for me. I wanted power, and I was going to have to take it. That wasn’t going to be a bloodless proposition.

He turned his gaze on me. “I understand you have some experience with that sort of thing. They

don’t call you ‘kingbreaker’ for nothing.”

“Well, my uncle wasn’t a king,” I said. “So, I don’t know why people say that. And besides, his

death was accidental and tragic.”

The prince laughed a full-bellied laugh, sitting back in his chair.

I waited, glaring at him.

When he was done, he smiled at me for a minute, and then the expression slid off his face, leaving

him as blank as before. “Here’s what I propose. My brother, the king, is in our way. If you help me, together, I’m sure we can dispatch him.”

“You’re asking me to enter into a treasonous plot to kill the king?”

“Yes, keep up,” he said.

“*I’m* the one with leverage. I’m asking *you* for things. Have you ever actually been in a negotiation in your life?”

He laughed again.

“Stop that,” I said.

“Listen, if you tell the king that I’ve defiled his wife, then he’ll be angry with me, and he’ll have to have her executed, but he won’t be able to have *me* executed, because I’m the doffine. If he had an heir, maybe he could, but as long as I’m the heir, it’s impossible. And as for what will happen to you?

Nothing beneficial. I highly doubt the king will be happy with you, the messenger of such grim

tidings.”

“Wait a moment. The queen will be executed?”

“Well, yes,” said the prince.

“Why?”

“Because interfering with the line of succession is also treason. So, she’ll have to be punished.”

Interfering with the line of…? Ah, so if she was pregnant by the prince, that would mean the line of succession was subverted. A good reason to track through the female line, the way we had in Islaigne.

I rolled my eyes.

“I promise you this is the case.”

“No, I wasn’t reacting to that, rather to your barbaric, male-centric worldview,” I said. “Never

mind. Listen, I don’t care if my leverage isn’t beneficial to you. That’s not the way it works. If I want to tell the king what you’re doing, I will.”

“And sentence poor Coralie to death?” He clucked his tongue at me, and he still sounded sarcastic.

Did he even like Coralie? “You are so very vicious, Lady Kingbreaker.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

He laughed again. “Maybe I could shorten it into a pet name of sorts. ‘Breakums’ perhaps?”

My nostrils flared.

“Where was I?” He dragged a hand over his chin. “Oh, yes, so, what if you helped me instead?

Together, we could take the throne from my brother, and then I'll be able to annul our marriage, and we can go to Islaigne together."

"I'm not taking you with me to Islaigne."

"Very well then, I'll provide you a ship, and we can race. Winner takes all." He grinned widely.

"What do you want with my country?"

"What do *you* want with it? I understand it's been entirely destroyed. Burned to ash."

I sighed.

"How about you keep your counsel, and I'll keep mine?" he said.

I didn't say anything.

"What do you say, Kingbreaker? Is it a deal?"

I chewed on my lip. Guillame had already put things in place to steal provisions and procure us a

ship, but it would be more difficult to take it if I didn't kill the prince. Maybe I shouldn't call it stealing. I liked to think of it as taking my dowry back.

Guillame seemed to think that we could simply kill the prince anyway, and that we could somehow

make the plan work. But I wasn't so sure. And I'd put myself in a bad position, revealing anything at all to the prince, because now he might be suspicious if I up and died out of nowhere.

Also, it was pretty obvious that there was not going to be any consummation, which… well, that

actually pleased me.

“How long do you think it would take us to kill the king?” I said.

“I have no idea,” he said. “I would bow to your expertise in that area.”

“Why do you hate him?” I said.

“He’s a horrible person,” said the prince, but his voice was inflectionless again, and I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic.

“Do you hate him because you want his wife, or are you sleeping with his wife because you hate

him?”

The prince chuckled. “Yes.”

I rolled my eyes again. If it all went well, then a deal with the prince might make things better. I wouldn’t have to fake my death, and the prince would give me what I wanted. As for his comment

about our racing to Islaigne, well, I thought he must only be saying that to goad me. He was a very perverse sort of person, and I wouldn’t put it past him.

“Do you agree or not?”

“What if I don’t?” I said. “What if I go to the king and tell him everything? What if I say that you intend to kill him? Could he have you executed then?”

“He’d never give you a ship,” said the prince. “If you get rid of me, you get rid of the only person in this entire castle who might be willing to help you.”

“Oh, is that so? Because it doesn’t seem as though you’re very fond of me.”

“But I respect you,” said the prince. “I can see that there’s much more to you than meets the eye. I don’t underestimate you, not like they do. You

want me on your side, trust me. Say you'll help."

"All right," I said. "I'll help. We have a deal." And the minute the words were out of my mouth, I

wondered if I'd just made a horrible mistake.

* * *

"Let me get this straight," said Guillame, sitting on the trunk in my bedchamber. The window was

open over his head and it let in warm, dry air. "We're not killing him now?"

"No," I said.

"But we're killing the king?" said Guillame. "What did the king ever do to us?"

"I don't know," I said, irritated. I paced in front of him. I had put on a cloak over my sheer

nightdress, and I shoved my hands into its deep pockets. "But I don't have the luxury of only killing people who deserve it. You of all people should know this. The musqueteers you killed to save me

when we met, did they deserve it?"

"Well, that was clear, though," said Guillame. "It was you or them. I picked you."

"And this is the best way to get what we want," I said.

"I still don't understand why we've abandoned the original plan of killing the prince."

"Because he can help us."

Guillame nodded. “It’s because you saw him shirtless.”

“It is not,” I said. “He’s… horrible.”

“Right.” Guillame leaned his head back against the wall, peering up at the open window above his

head. “You know, I’m not an idiot. I see how this is going to go. I’m going to sacrifice everything for you, and you’re going to pick him.”

“What?” I furrowed my brow at him.

“Hell, I’ll probably end up dying for you or something like that. If I had half a brain, I would tell you to do this on your own, that unless we killed him, I was out.”

“Don’t do that!” I knelt down in front of him and took him by the hands. “Guillame, look at me.”

He didn’t. “Is this the speech about how it would weaken us if there were romantic feelings, and

that you don’t like me that way, and I shouldn’t like you either?”

I let go of him, sighing.

He sighed too.

“I need you,” I whispered.

He looked back at me. “Don’t say that. Come on, that’s cheating.”

“It’s only the truth,” I said. “I need you. You are far more important to me than an illicit lover. That would only weaken us, and we are more than that. You are my…” Hadn’t I struggled to know what it

was that Guillame was to me? “My sword,” I settled on. “You are my advisor and my friend. My

dearest, closest friend. Please.”

His shoulders slumped.

“I hate the prince,” I said. “He’s lying with another woman, and he treats me like rubbish, and

there is nothing about him that would make me remotely attracted to him, not even if he was the last man on earth.”

“Whatever,” he said, getting up and climbing onto the trunk.

“Wait, Guillame, are you going to help me or not?”

He was hoisting himself out of the window. “What does a sword do except kill, Fleur?”

“Don’t call me that. Address me with respect. I am a queen,” I said, irritated.

He laughed, shooting a glance over his shoulder, winking at me. “You know I’m here for whatever

you want. Your loyal slave and all that. You want to kill the king? Let’s kill the blazing king.”

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